A Multi-method Examination of Race, Class, Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Motivations for Participation in the YouTube-based "It Gets Better Project"

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ABSTRACT

LAURIE MARIE PHILLIPS: A Multi-method Examination of Race, Class, Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Motivations for Participation in the YouTube-based "It Gets Better Project"
(Under the direction of Dr. Daniel Riffe)

On September 15, 2010, Dan Savage and Terry Miller created a YouTube channel that turned into a global phenomenon: the "It Gets Better Project" (IGBP). This multi-method study employs: 1) Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to examine race, class, gender, and sexual orientation within IGBP videos; and 2) video chat-based in-depth interviews for determining participants' motivations for IGBP participation and production of crowdsourced, social media-based strategic communication. Using sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' "matrix of domination" as a theoretical framework for understanding structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal oppressions that led to the IGBP's creation, video production, and video content, this empirical study draws from a sample of 21 videos and 20 interviews.

MCDA findings reveal that participants presented a pared-back version of their own racial, class, gender, and sexual identities; projected their identities onto viewers; and created and perpetuated myths through their video narratives. In doing so, certain identities are presented to the exclusion of others, potentially leaving viewers outside of these boundaries more isolated, at risk for being even more suicidal because again they do not fit in, and confused about what identities are

even possible. Thus, the IGBP videos both challenge the matrix of domination and reify its very existence.

Interview data reveal four categorizations, including participants': 1) felt sense of camaraderie with at-risk LGBTQ and questioning youth; 2) urgency to rectify what was missing from their own sexual identity development; 3) need to alter the media representation of lesbian and gay men in – and through – the IGBP; and 4) impact of their current positionality. Participants were forthcoming about the intersectionality of their racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, age, religious, and geographic identities and how those led to their IGBP participation, though that intersectionality rarely surfaced explicitly in their video content.

In addition to contributing to numerous literatures on LGBTQ suicide, bullying, and harassment; LGBTQ media representation; strategic communication; and online participatory culture, this study has several methodological, theoretical, and practical implications for both scholars and practitioners, including participant recruitment, video chat-based interviewing, application of the matrix of domination to strategic communication efforts, and more.

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PREFACE

"Today we have the power to give these kids hope. We have the tools to reach out to them and tell our stories and let them know that it does get better. Online support groups are great, GLSEN does amazing work, the Trevor Project is invaluable. But many LGBT youth can't picture what their lives might be like as openly gay adults. They can't imagine a future for themselves. So let's show them what our lives are like, let's show them what the future may hold in store for them" (Savage, 2010b).

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On July 9, 2010, 15-year-old Justin Aaberg committed suicide in his Anoka, Minnesota, bedroom (Weber, 2010). Aaberg, who identified as gay, was a frequent victim of sexual orientation-based peer harassment and bullying in his high school. The teenager represents just one of over a dozen youth suicides within the past few years that have received national and international news coverage (Mackenzie, 2010; Simon, 2010). What is unique about Aaberg and the latest string of youth suicides is their association with sexual orientation. Nationwide, multiple adolescents have taken their own lives in part because of their victimization for identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or for peers' *perceptions* of their homosexuality or bisexuality.

In response to Aaberg's suicide, and in conjunction with the suicide of Greensberg, Indiana, teenager Billy Lucas who was merely *perceived* to be gay by his high school classmates but bullied as if he openly identified as such (Brooks, 2010), columnist and "sexpert" (Thomas, 2011) Dan Savage created the YouTube-based It Gets Better Project (henceforth, IGBP). Through the creation and dissemination of video testimonials from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) adults targeted toward at-risk LGBTQ youth, thousands of messages of hope – and an expansive form of digital LGBTQ media representation – have surfaced. Subsequently, global media attention has been garnered for LGBTQ youth harassment, bullying, and suicide.

With social media tools like YouTube, media consumers have transformed from consumers alone into both consumers *and* producers through what Jenkins (2006b) describes as convergence culture: The merging of traditional and new media formats, non-profit and for-profit ventures, and the production and consumption of media. The ability to add one's voice to the media landscape is unquestionably one of the benefits of online-based social networking applications, and many marginalized groups have found or expanded community through identifying and communicating with those of the same race or ethnicity (i.e., AsianAve.com, BlackPlanet.com, MiGente.com), sexual orientation or gender expression (GayGirlNet.com, Gay.com, BiSocialNetwork.com, TransgenderMeetingPlace.com, QueerVillage.com), abilities (Disaboom.com), age group (Eons.com), and/or religion (Muxlim.com). For LGBTQ individuals, particularly youth living in areas with virtually no easily accessible LGBTQ resources – or awareness of these resources – some portion of the initial understanding of what it means to be LGBTQ often comes from the media (Gray, 2009; Gross, 2001).

According to Pew Internet & American Life data, 93% of all U.S. teens use the Internet in some capacity and the majority of teen usage is devoted to social networking sites or obtaining news or information ("Trend Data," 2011). These data are not segregated by sexual orientation, but they do indicate that a sizable portion of what teens learn about all topics, including sexual orientation, is found online, including but not limited to projects like the IGBP. In turn, how and why are LGBTQ individuals constructing what it means to be LGBTQ today, and for whom, what, where, when, why, and how does "it gets better?" By conducting a multi-method study employing multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) of IGBP videos and semi-structured in-

depth interviews with IGBP video producers, this study answers two research questions: 1) how are race, class, gender, and sexual orientation discussed in the IGBP?; and 2) what motivations do IGBP participants identify in explaining why they participated?

This dissertation contains six chapters and is organized in the following manner. Chapter 2 contains a brief explanation of the IGBP and a review of multiple bodies of literature. To understand why the IGBP was launched, I explain the pervasiveness of bullying in America today and provide an overview of LGBTQ bullying, harassment, and suicidality research. Next, I discuss research pertaining to LGBTQ traditional and online media representation, which is then followed by an overview of online participatory culture. Having situated the IGBP at the intersections of: 1) bullying, harassment, and suicidality; 2) LGBTQ media representation; and 3) online participatory culture, I then turn to the study's theoretical framework, Collins' (2009) matrix of domination, and present the two research questions. Following the literature review, Chapter 3 centers on an in-depth explanation of the study's multi-method research design, including my positionality as a researcher, the methods used (MCDA and semi-structured in-depth interviews), and how the data were analyzed. The MCDA analysis and discussion are located in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 contains the analysis and discussion of the participant interviews. Lastly, my conclusions, which bring together the MCDA and interview findings and directions for future research, are in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter contains multidisciplinary literature from three areas: 1) LGBTQ bullying, harassment, and suicide; 2) LGBTQ traditional and online media representation; and 3) online participatory culture. Before situating the IGBP at the intersection of these three bodies of literature, giving an overview of the study's theoretical framework, and presenting my research questions, I provide a brief overview of the IGBP to familiarize readers with the "worldwide movement" ("About," 2013).

The It Gets Better Project (IGBP)

On September 14, 2010, sex and relationship advice columnist and proudly out gay activist Dan Savage reposted information to his blog about Lucas' suicide, and within five hours of posting, Savage found the following comment from a reader:

> My heart breaks for the pain and torment you went through, Billy Lucas. I wish I could have told you that things would get better and that not everyone in your life would be a jerk. I hope those who harassed you get jail time. Rest In Peace kiddo. (Savage, 2010a)

Prompted by the reader's desire to talk to suicidal LGBTQ teens and prevent them from taking the next step, Savage aimed to do just that. He and husband Terry Miller, both victims of harassment and bullying during their middle and high school years, created a YouTube channel on September 15, 2010, and filmed a home video about their experiences of overcoming hardship (Savage & Miller, 2011). Both deemed the first video unhelpful for their target audience, and Savage and Miller reshot the video in a bar, deliberately framing their message as one of hope. Amongst other claims in the

video, they promised LGBTQ youth that life gets better once they leave grade school –

and their hometowns – behind (Gross, 2011).

Savage and Miller's eight-and-a-half minute video was posted on YouTube on

September 21, 2010, marking the start of the It Gets Better Project (Savage & Miller,

2011). The video only briefly touches on their own childhood experiences of harassment

and bullying but focuses primarily on the relationship, familial, economic, and career

successes they have achieved as adults (ItGetsBetterProject, 2010). Two days after

posting it, Savage invited readers of his *Savage Love* column to contribute their own

videos illustrating to youth how life gets better (Savage, 2010b) and set a goal of 100

videos (Savage & Miller, 2011). Within 24 hours of posting this call, Savage had

received more than 3,000 e-mails from LGBTQ and heterosexual viewers alike (Parker-

Pope, 2010), and by the end of the first week he had received over 1,000 videos

(Savage & Miller, 2011), exceeding the YouTube channel capacity (Hartlaub, 2010).

Logistical constraints necessitated the establishment of a separate website,

itgetsbetter.org, to house the heavy volume of videos, which was launched on October

8, 2010 (Gensemer, 2010).

Since its inception, more than 50,000 user-generated videos have been created

from "celebrities, organizations, activists, politicians, and media personalities" worldwide,

and the IGBP videos have garnered over 50 million views ("About," 2013). While the

statistics are impressive, for a broader understanding of what is encapsulated within the

IGBP, it is important to know who has participated in the project. Numerous LGBTQ-

identified and heterosexual ally musicians, actors/actresses, comedians/comediennes,

talk show hosts, and other media personalities have contributed videos, as have staff at

organizations such as Facebook, Google, Apple, the Children's Hospital of Boston,

Thomson Reuters, and The Gap; students, faculty, and staff at colleges and universities;

and professional athletes from the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA),

Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL), and Major League

Soccer (MLS) ("About," 2013). American and international politicians alike also have

submitted videos, including unsolicited videos from U.S. President Barack Obama and

others in positions of power to change policies that would directly impact LGBTQ

individuals' lives (Savage & Miller, 2011). Still, the bulk of contributions have come from

non-famous LGBTQ adults, youth, and allies, in the U.S. and beyond, and international

IGBP affiliates have launched in Australia, Chile, Denmark, Italy, Jamaica, Mexico,

Paraguay, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland ("It Gets Better

Project International," 2013).

Savage stated the IGBP's goal is for LGBTQ adults to spread messages of hope

to at-risk LGBTQ youth, but the medium through which these messages are distributed

is of particular importance. Through his work as an advice columnist and editorial

director of Seattle's weekly alternative newspaper, *The Stranger*, Savage has been a

frequently invited speaker at colleges and universities nationwide (Parker-Pope, 2010).

But to reach suicidal K-12 students across the U.S., Savage was well aware that

attempting to do so would require an alternative strategy because homophobic school

administrators and parents would not be inviting him into their school assembly halls.

Moreover, there are limitations in face-to-face message dissemination concerning the

number of youth Savage could reach at any given time. Savage also faced the long-

standing challenge of overcoming the predatory stigma that many social and religious

conservatives attach to LGBTQ adults, claiming they attempt to "recruit" children by engaging them in conversation of any kind. The combination of these challenges led Savage to YouTube, a social media outlet open to anyone with an Internet connection and minimal technical skill that youth frequently visit, bypassing the need for anyone's permission to speak directly to LGBTQ youth (Kelly & Block, 2010).

Although a growing number of LGBTQ individuals appear in the media today, Savage stressed the importance of LGBTQ youth seeing/hearing from everyday people (i.e, non-celebrities). Stating that certain segments of the LGBTQ population are rarely featured in the media, specifically lesbians (Parker-Pope, 2010), Savage invited "other gay and lesbian 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 contribute to the project (Savage, 2010b), and by the third week the project videos had accumulated from men and women of varying sexual and gender expressions across multiple racial, ethnic, religious, and age categories (Hartlaub, 2010).

Savage expressed concern over some of the initial IGBP content, stating that many producers were making the same mistakes he and Miller made during their initial taping: focusing too much on their suffering and too little on how life gets better (Hartlaub, 2010). Savage noted that 40% of all homeless teenagers are LGBTQ teens who have been thrown out of their homes by disapproving parents/guardians, and he cringed at the oft-repeated sentiment in many videos stating that adolescents should simply go to their parents for help (Bennett, 2010).

In the first several weeks of the IGBP's life cycle, Savage and Miller watched every IGBP submitted and uploaded acceptable videos onto the official IGBP YouTube

channel. Due to the IGBP's rapid growth, it quickly became impossible for them to keep up, and the gatekeeping function was delegated to volunteers (Parker-Pope, 2011). Today, videos are vetted for itgetsbetter.org and not the YouTube channel, as Savage remarked "that's [volunteer viewings] the only quality control we can enforce because we can't control who puts what on YouTube" (Parker-Pope, 2011). But by guiding the message content and vetting videos for IGBP website inclusion, Savage and staff exhibit a certain level of control over the project (Phillips & Brabham, 2012) that by default results in a narrowed version of LGBTQ identities.

Criticism of the IGBP has come from inside and outside of the organization. While many journalists have praised the IGBP and labeled it "a new kind of activism" (Mongillo, 2010) or "a movement" (Butler, 2010), others have chastised the IGBP, Savage, or both, particularly those within the LGBTQ communities (Eichler, 2010). For example, blogger Rebecca Novack (2010) wrote a lengthy post offering 13 reasons why she does not like the IGBP as an anti-bullying messaging strategy, including Savage and Miller's classist implications about life improving for everyone with the passage of time. Moreover, Savage and Miller have been criticized for portraying a lifestyle that many non-White, non-cisgendered male LGBTQ adults will never achieve (Cage, 2010; Herrera y Lozano, 2011; Puar, 2010), and queer blogger Jason Tseng's (2010) IGBP critique drew attention to problems within the oft-labeled (singular) "LGBTQ community:"

> The gay community's problems surrounding race and gender became abundantly evident to me as queer men of color, especially feminine queer men of color, get pushed to the fringes of gay life… I went from being ostracized by my straight classmates in high school to being ostracized by many White gay men in an urban gay enclave.

In conjunction with the inherent problems of Savage and Miller neglecting to acknowledge racial, class, gender, and sexual orientation-based differences in defining how "it gets better" and their perpetuation of gay male stereotypes, columnist Sady Doyle (2010) pointed out that the IGBP does not offer any suggestions for how to make life better for LGBTQ youth in the interim, nor does it tell at-risk LGBTQ youth *where* they can get help (Veldman, 2010). Alternative anti-bullying projects were developed to address these shortcomings, including the "We Got Your Back Project" and the "Make It Better Project." The "We Got Your Back Project's" tagline states it is "a place for everyone's voice," and the founders explicitly encourage individuals marginalized *within* the LGBTQ communities to participate: bisexuals, transgender individuals, queer individuals, and/or people of color ("About the Project," 2010). Created by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network less than two weeks after the IGBP's launch, the goal of the "Make It Better Project" is to provide everyone with the tools required to "make schools safer for LGBT students right now" ("About," 2011).

True to form, Savage never backed down from his critics, stating that his and Miller's video was not meant to represent all within the LGBTQ communities, nor are videos a panacea for anti-gay bullying. Savage repeatedly claimed that the project's intent is not for consumers to adopt a lifestyle like theirs, but rather for LGBTQ youth to understand they are not alone, that they have options, and that life improves post-grade school (Kelly & Block, 2010). In reaction to the criticism, Savage outlined what he believes is necessary for combatting sexual orientation-based bullying:

    1) passing safe schools legislation in all states;
    2) pushing for anti-bullying programs;
    3) holding negligent school administrators accountable; and

4) confronting bigots and demagogues who inject hate into the national conversation about LGBT people and give straight children license to abuse and bully LGBT kids. (Savage, 2010d)

Savage argued that these efforts will take several years to reach fruition, but in the interim IGBP messages of hope can be distributed to at-risk LGBTQ youth (Hartlaub, 2010). He stated that nothing about the IGBP inherently restrains anyone from doing more to eradicate anti-LGBTQ bullying (Savage, 2010c), but he failed to address why some LGBTQ individuals are less often included in LGBTQ media representation (women; people of color; bisexuals; transgender individuals; and/or sexual and gender minorities falling outside of the LGBTQ acronym) or how to rectify these omissions. Instead, Savage assumed all would enthusiastically jump on the IGBP bandwagon while ignoring why competing projects have launched in response to the IGBP.

Despite an overwhelmingly majority of U.S. teens having Internet access in some form, youth who are questioning their sexual orientation may have restricted or monitored access (at home, school, libraries, community centers, etc.) and others have none whatsoever. Attempting to overcome accessibility concerns, as well as reach LGBTQ youth through multiple media outlets, Savage and Miller released *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living* on March 22, 2011, consisting of transcribed IGBP videos and invited essays, and two, hour-long specials aired on MTV in February 2012 and October 2012 (Bosman, 2010; "Second," 2012). The IGBP operates as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, and the purchase of IGBP merchandise (books, apparel, etc.) or contributions go to two beneficiaries: The Trevor Project, which offers resources for at-risk and suicidal LGBTQ youth; and the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), a non-profit advocacy organization

focusing on safe schools for all children, including sexual minorities ("About," 2013). Both organizations have long been involved in combatting LGBTQ bullying, harassment, and suicide, which have been the focal point of academic, government, and industry researchers for decades.

LGBTQ Bullying, Harassment, and Suicide

The topic of bullying has been a constant focus of news coverage for the past few years, in part because of the IGBP's viral success; governmental attention paid to bullying at the federal, state, and local levels; popular documentaries that have visually depicted the horrors of bullying and spawned related social change projects (i.e., Lee Hirsch's *Bully* and subsequent "The Bully Project"); and newsworthy stories of school bus drivers getting bullied by kids and receiving substantial crowdfunded monies (Grimes, 2012). Before this cultural shift placed bullying front and center within news cycles, ad campaigns, popular media, and policymaking, the topic received far less attention, specifically the pervasiveness of *LGBTQ-related* bullying and suicide.

LGBTQ-related bullying garnered increased media coverage after Aaberg and Lucas' summer 2010 suicides, but for the past couple of decades bullying and harassment have been a focal point for social change organizations like the Trevor Project and GLSEN as well as for some policymakers, educators, change agents, and researchers. Before I provide a brief background of LGBTQ bullying and harassment research, it is essential for readers to understand the full meaning of what is meant by bullying. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines it,

> Bullying is when a person or group repeatedly tries to harm someone who is weaker or who they think is weaker. Sometimes it involves direct attacks such as hitting, name-calling, teasing or taunting. Sometimes it is indirect, such as spreading rumors or trying to make others reject someone. Often people dismiss

bullying among kids as a normal part of growing up, but bullying is harmful. It can lead children and teenagers to feel tense and afraid. It may lead them to avoid school. In severe cases, teens who are bullied may feel they need to take drastic measures or react violently. Others even consider suicide. For some, the effects of bullying last a lifetime. ("Bullying," 2011)

The CDC is only one of several government entities involved in the recent bullying epidemic, as will be addressed in later in this section. First, I review academic research on bullying and harassment.

The Academy's Research Findings on LGBTQ Bullying and Harassment

Most researchers express the belief that no one factor alone leads a person to take his/her own life, but LGBTQ youth suicide researchers have found a strong correlation between bullying, harassment, and suicide, as detailed below. Before explaining what the research shows, it is imperative to understand what is included within *and* excluded from this body of research.

As UCLA's multidisciplinary Sexual Minority Assessment Research Team (SMART) explained, there are three components involved in sexual orientation that affect how data are gathered and research is accumulated: sexual identification, behavior, and attraction. Sexual identification is how one identifies his/her sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, heterosexual, etc.), whereas sexual behavior concerns the sex of one's intimate partners (i.e., same-sex, different sex, or both sexes). Sexual attraction consists of the sex or gender an individual is attracted to, such as exclusively females, mostly females, equally females and males, etc. (Almazan et al., 2009). Early researchers had a tendency to conflate sexual attraction, behavior, and identification, leading to problematic results when trying to understand LGBTQ suicidality data across studies (Hass et al., 2010).

In conjunction with the differences between sexual attraction, behavior, and identification, SMART researchers also stressed the importance of cultural relevancy. When researchers attempt to gather data from different racial or ethnic groups, different questions are often required because of varying viewpoints toward sexual orientation. Recently, several researchers pushed for greater diversity within LGBTQ suicidality research and other related topics (Alimahomed, 2010; Almazan et al., 2009; Brooks et al., 2008; Chun & Singh, 2010; Collins, 2009; Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999), but in my judgment the bulk of the research reviewed below has taken a narrow, White-centric – and at times, exclusively male – view of LGBTQ suicidality, as will be seen.

The Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration's *1989 Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide* offered some of the earliest data on the pervasiveness of LGBTQ youth suicide, specifically revealing that gay and lesbian youth are two-to-three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers (Gibson, 1989). The report identified predictors of LGBTQ youth suicide, including school-based verbal and physical harassment, societal pressures, low self-esteem, familial problems, religious conflicts, social isolation, lack of professional help and youth programs, relationships, and sexually-transmitted diseases. Emphasizing the dearth of information about gay and lesbian youth and the frequency with which gay men and lesbians face problems like substance abuse, depression, relationship problems, dropping out of school, homelessness, and suicide, the report concluded that societal homophobia and heterosexism were "the root problem of gay youth suicide" (Gibson, 1989, p. 115). Of particular relevance to this study are the *Report's* findings pertaining to media portrayal of homosexuality: the majority of entertainment-based imagery at the

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time featured suicidal gay men, and news coverage centered on gay individuals as "scandalous" and "disgracing communities" (Gibson, 1989, p. 131), foreshadowing the work of several LGBTQ media scholars presented later in this chapter.

Gibson's (1989) reliance upon non-representative samples and conflation of suicidal ideation and completion caused researcher skepticism of the *Report's* findings (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Eliason; 2011), and Eliason (2011) revealed the effects of politicization on sexual orientation-related empirical data: the George H. W. Bush administration kept the *Report's* findings hidden because of Gibson's calls for teachers to normalize homosexuality to prevent harassment. Despite socially conservative political agendas and fewer federal funding dollars allocated to LGBTQ youth suicide prevention efforts, academic research on LGBTQ youth suicide has expanded substantially over the past four decades (Haas et al., 2011). However, few preventative measures, LGBTQ-specific interventions, or public health policies have been rolled out on a large scale, and one possibility for this reliance upon small-scale efforts is the inconsistency of variable conceptualization and operationalization (Haas et al., 2011).

As alluded to in my discussion of SMART's sexual orientation classifications, researchers have found *how* sexuality is defined determines the size of the LGB population (Almazan et al., 2009; Pathela et al., 2006). Furthermore, variability in gender expression and identity among individuals of all ages, let alone youth, contributes to the dearth of nationwide survey research (Haas et al., 2011), rendering the LGBTQ label inaccurate: research has focused on just lesbian (L), gay (G), or bisexual (B) individuals, to the exclusion of transgender (T) and queer-identified (Q) individuals. Other researchers have found that even further distinctions are necessary, such as the

inclusion of an "unsure" category within sexual identity (Zhao et al., 2010) or heterosexually-identified individuals with same-sex attraction or behaviors (Murphy, 2007). Compounding sexual and gender identity measurement complications are conceptual differences between suicide ideation, attempt, and completion, which necessitate that each be a distinct variable for accurate measurement (Haas et. al. 2011; Murphy, 2007; Zhao et al., 2010).

In addition to measurement challenges, there are practical data concerns as well. Sexual orientation is not a demographic variable that autopsy technicians tabulate, rendering statistics on LGBTQ suicide *completion* unknown, particularly among youth suicides for which suicidality is often attributed to factors other than sexual orientation (Haas et al., 2011; Pullen, 2010). On the other hand, data pertaining to suicide *attempts* among sexual minority youth are more readily available and have served as the focus of most academic research.

Since Gibson (1989) released his findings in the late 1980s, several suicide researchers have corroborated that gay and lesbian youth are more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers. In fact, numerous studies have found that LGB-identified youth attempt suicide at a rate two-to-seven times greater than heterosexual youth (DuRant, Krowchuk, & Sinal, 1998; Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Fergusson, Horwood, & Beautrais, 1999; Garofalo et al., 1998, 1999; King et al., 2008; Kulkin, Chauvin, & Percle, 2000; Murphy, 2007; Remafedi, 2002; Remafedi et al., 1998; Russell, 2003; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Safren & Heimberg, 1999). Within the LGB population, researchers have found that gay male youth are most at risk for suicide (Garofalo et al.,

1999; Russell, 2003), and those attempts generally take place among individuals 25 years of age or younger (Paul et al., 2002).

Consistently LGB suicidality research has shown that those exhibiting same-sex attraction, behavior, or identity are at higher risk for suicide, and a number of individual and institutional predictors contribute to what researchers have labeled gay-related or minority stress (Gibson, 1989; Haas et al., 2011; Meyer, 1995; Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994; Weber, 2008). At the individual level, LGB youth often experience "personal rejection, hostility, harassment, bullying, and physical violence" from their own family members as well as their peers, inside and outside of school, and institutionally, laws and public policies rendering sexual minorities second-class citizens cause further stress for LGB individuals of all ages (Haas et al., 2011, p. 22).

The combined effects of sexual orientation-based stigma, prejudice, and discrimination cause heightened stress among LGB individuals, which in turn leads to a high rate of mental health problems, surpassing heterosexuals, and substance use and abuse problems (Meyer, 2003; Weber, 2008). Furthermore, LGBTQ individuals face additional stressors related to sexual and/or gender identity, heterosexism, and internalized homophobia (Lewis et al., 2003; Weber, 2008), and those stressors are often exacerbated if an LGB individual is female and/or a person of color because stress manifests itself differently across race, gender, sexual orientation, and age (Meyer, 2003; Weber, 2008). Scales have been developed to measure within-group LGBTQ differences (Balsam et al., 2011), though for many years researchers had not acknowledged what became known as multiple minority differences in many facets of LGBTQ research (Alimahomed, 2010; Andersen & Collins, 2007; Brooks et al., 2008,

Collins, 2009; Chun & Singh, 2010; Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Mitchell-Brody & Ritchie, 2010).

A substantial body of LGBTQ stress, bullying/harassment, and suicidality data continue to accumulate across disciplines, but as researchers' extensive meta-analyses have shown, there are limitations in all studies, particularly concerning the sampling techniques employed or the manner in which constructs have been conceptualized and operationalized (Meyer, 2003; Haas et al., 2011). What can be said with certainty is that across studies academic researchers have repeatedly found strong links between bullying, harassment, and suicidality among LGBTQ individuals, although transgender individuals are studied with far less frequency – a pattern not limited to suicidality studies alone (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Coupled with academic data sets are those resulting from government and proprietary research, both of which I review below.

Governmental Data on Bullying

Released in May 2011, federal statistics from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics show the pervasiveness of bullying in public and private schools across the country: 28% of all students reported having been bullied face-to-face at school and another 6% cyberbullied (i.e., bullied online) ("Students Reports," 2011). But the data resulting from the stratified, multistage cluster sample are problematic for a number of reasons. Gathered during the 2008-2009 academic year, data were only collected from students in grades 6-12 among those who fell within the 12- to 18-year-old age range, neglecting the fact that bullying takes place outside of these artificial research parameters. Evidence for these claims is provided by IGBP participants who experienced bullying while in kindergarten (YouthPrideChorus, 2010),

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and the circumstances that led to the suicides of collegians Tyler Clementi and Raymond Chase (Friedman, 2010).

In addition to sampling limitations, students' race/ethnicity, sex, grade, and household income were collected, but researchers failed to collect sexual orientation data, thereby neglecting understanding of the differences within the multitude of bullying types. Unquestionably there are challenges inherent in collecting sexual orientation-based data from youth who may be in the process of defining their sexual identity and/or unwilling to self- or publicly identify as LGBTQ on a government survey, but these data are insufficient when attempting to understand the magnitude of sexual orientation-based bullying (Almazan et al., 2009). The proposed Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA) would require that the Commissioner of Education Statistics regularly collect bullying data from students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other school officials ("Bill Text," 2011).

Federally-mandated research including data on LGBTQ-related bullying, harassment, and suicidality has been sparse, but within the past few years the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Education, and U.S. Department of Justice have joined forces to create stopbullying.gov, a website intended to be a resource for students, parents, and educators that focuses on explaining and stopping various types of bullying (verbal, social, physical, and cyberbullying) ("President and First Lady," 2011). Within the same week of the website's March 9, 2011, launch, Senators Robert Casey (D-PA) and Mark Kirk (R-IL) reintroduced the Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA) to the Senate, which would mandate that all federally-funded schools prohibit sexual orientation and gender identity-based bullying

and harassment, and President and Michelle Obama held the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention ("President and First Lady," 2011; "Safe Schools Improvement Act," 2011). Shortly after, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools and eight other federal departments joined together at the Second Annual Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Summit to continue the development of a national strategy for bullying prevention, and October 2011 was deemed National Anti-bullying Month by PACER, a Minneapolis-based parental training and information center that receives federal funding from the U.S. Department of Education ("National Anti-Bullying Month," 2011). In conjunction with conferences and summits, letter-writing campaigns from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights and U.S. Secretary Arne Duncan to K-12 educators, institutions of higher education, governors, and chief state school officers were undergone shortly after the IGBP's launch, and the U.S. Department of Education and the Office for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention have hosted anti-bullying webinars and developed resources for educators and school bus drivers alike (Duncan, 2011; "Federal Partners," 2011). Although sexual orientation-based bullying has dominated news headlines since the inception of the IGBP, bullying of all children, regardless of perceived or self-identified sexual identity, gender identity, or gender expression, has been a systemic problem in the U.S. for decades, and the government's response to bullying is not dictated by the IGBP or recent LGBTQ-related suicides alone.

Despite LGBTQ newsmagazine *The Advocate* citing President Obama as "the most LGBTQ-friendly president in U.S. history" (Ring, 2013), little federal research has been done since Gibson's (1989) groundbreaking study, and most youth-centric anti-

bullying efforts have been spearheaded by government entities outside of the Oval

Office. Accordingly, there is much that remains unknown about LGBTQ bullying,

harassment, and suicidality, and now more than ever federally conducted/funded

research is needed so that the extent of youth bullying – and the various types – can be

ascertained and potential solutions proposed. Non-profit organizations have shouldered

some of the burden and attempted to reconcile governmental lapses in data collection

and heterosexist survey designs, as I explain in the next section.

Proprietary Data on Bullying

Having first been collected by GLSEN in 1999 when the non-profit organization

had enough resources to begin conducting research, proprietary data about sexual

orientation-based bullying are available that provide a more comprehensive view than

governmental data or smaller-scale academic studies. Most recently, GLSEN surveyed

7,261 LGBTQ-identified students between the ages of 13 and 21 residing in all 50 states

and found that nearly 85% of LGBTQ-identified survey participants were the victims of

sexual orientation-based verbal harassment (defined by GLSEN as name-calling or

threats of violence); 40% experienced physical harassment (pushed/shoved); and 19%

were physically assaulted (punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon). Additionally,

nearly 53% of participants stated that they were cyberbullied and received verbally

abusive text messages, e-mails, instant messages, or social networking postings.

Although not quite as pervasive as sexual orientation-based bullying, high percentages

of survey participants revealed being verbally harassed (64%), physically harassed

(27%), or physically assaulted (13%) for their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2009).

GLSEN's survey data provides the most extensive known dataset about LGBTQ-specific harassment, but much like the U.S. Department of Education's data, it too is limited because of the study's sampling techniques. GLSEN recruited LGBTQ-identified youth from community groups, listservs, websites, GLSEN chapters, and youth advocacy organizations, as well as by running targeted ads on MySpace and Facebook. Similar to government data collection efforts, survey participants were between the ages of 13 and 21 in grades 6-12, but those who are part of LGBTQ organizations differ greatly from those who are not – particularly if they openly identify as LGBTQ and perhaps in doing so make themselves an identifiable target for homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic bullies.

Further research about sexual orientation-based bullying's pervasiveness is needed from academic, governmental, and proprietary sources, extending beyond non-random samples, because statistically generalizable data serve as the driving force for many policy decisions. Challenges related to LGBTQ self-identification likely will remain until the stigma of being a sexual minority is eradicated, but I argue that it is crucial for researchers to strive for random samples *and* to share their empirically-tested techniques for how to include sexual orientation-based questions within survey research.

As I alluded to earlier, through the course of Gibson's (1989) research he found that media representation may play a role in how peers treat LGBTQ youth and in turn how LGBTQ youth treat themselves. Given that the IGBP is one of the most extensive collections of LGBTQ media representation to date, in the next section I provide a brief overview of LGBTQ traditional and online media representation to explain how the IGBP fits into this broader landscape, aligning with Pullen's (2010) claim: "Any understanding

of online new media must consider its textual and generic precursors in terms of form,

address, and framing" (p. 3).

LGBTQ Media Representation

Considering the popularity of numerous broadcast and premium cable television

series (i.e., *Glee*; *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*; *Modern Family*; *The New Normal*; *The

Real L Word;* etc.) and mainstream films featuring LGBTQ individuals (*The Kids are All

Right*; *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*; etc.); extensive news coverage of LGBTQ-related

topics (bullying; marriage equality; Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) repeal; Chick-fil-a's

homophobic corporate stance; celebrities coming out; and President Obama's

advancements for LGBTQ equality); and even nationally-syndicated advertisements

featuring LGBTQ individuals/themes (Google Chrome's "It Gets Better Project;" JC

Penney's ads featuring same-sex parents; Oreo's rainbow-stuffed "Pride cookie;" etc.),

one might conclude that LGBTQ individuals are everywhere in the mainstream media.

On closer inspection it becomes apparent that not only is LGBTQ representation still

rare, but diversity within that representation remains virtually non-existent.

According to recent proprietary research from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against

Defamation (GLAAD), 97% of characters in primetime broadcast television are

heterosexual with only slightly more LGBTQ representation on cable programming.

Within the LGBTQ characters depicted on TV, the composition is of predominantly non-

Latino gay White males, and LGBTQ people of color, Latino/a ethnicity, and/or women

are shown on TV disproportionately less than their actual representation in U.S. society

(Graddick et al., 2011b). Collectively, research data show that the umbrella term

"LGBTQ" is misleading due to the virtual nonexistence of L, B, T, and Q characters

(Graddick et al., 2011a), which has held true for as long as LGBTQ people identified as such and have been featured in the media (Branchik, 2002; Chasin, 2000; Clark, 1993; Gross, 2005; Moritz, 1999; Schulman, 1998; Sender, 2004; Streitmatter, 1995, 2009; Walters, 2003).

Predating television by a few decades, images of what could be interpreted as gay males date back to 1895 within film, though gay men and lesbians rarely have been shown in mainstream films (Gross, 2001). A few decades later, homemade print publications like 1924's *Friendship and Freedom* for gay men or 1947's *Vice Versa* for lesbians offered an avenue for textual sexual expression (Streitmatter, 1995), and what emerged in the late 1940s in print and broadcast media included characterizations of lesbians and gay men as perverted, psychologically ill individuals (Alwood, 1996; Gross, 2001, 2005; Sender, 2004, 2006; Streitmatter, 1995, 2009; Walters, 2003). As Streitmatter (2009) discussed, examples of these media portrayals included journalistic labeling of gay and lesbian government officials as "Perverts on the Potomac" in 1950; coverage (and lack thereof) of both the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion and the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s; and the mid-1990s development of the same-sex marriage narrative. By the mid-1990s, LGBTQ individuals were an identifiable market that commanded the attention of mainstream marketers, with ads featuring and targeting gay men and significant trade press coverage of "the market," to the disgust of some (Chasin, 2000; Schulman, 1998) and at the behest of others (Lukenbill, 1999; Witeck & Combs, 2006).

When Hollywood began to depict gay men – and to a much lesser extent lesbians – after decades of media exclusion, their roles were typically relegated to "victim or

villain" (Gross, 2001, p. 57), including suicidal imagery like 1970's *Boys in the Band,* 1996's *Set It Off,* or 2005's *Brokeback Mountain* (Streitmatter, 2009), or as stereotypical, desexualized caricatures whose actual sexuality was rarely discussed or shown in any capacity. Moreover, the "victim or villain" media characterization was only magnified for gay men during the AIDS epidemic (Gross, 2001; Streitmatter, 2009; Walters, 2003). Through this limited inclusion, viewers commonly saw visions of the "exotic other" or "gays that are really like straights" (Walters, 2003, p. 15), and while Hollywood has loosened its restrictions on gays in mainstream films and on broadcast television, scholars have asserted that gays and lesbians must be secondary characters in order for mainstream financial success (Gross, 2001, Walters, 2003).

Unquestionably, significant advancements have been made over time concerning the frequency of LGBTQ representation within various media outlets. As Streitmatter (2009) asserted, gay men and lesbians' media presence has "radically transformed" alongside the "seismic shift in the nation's collective attitude toward gays and lesbians" (p. 1) that resulted from decades-long "protesting, cajoling, and negotiating by gay and lesbian activists" (Alwood, 1996, p. 318). Examples of advancements include the popularity of on-air television series *Glee*, which depicted an on-screen kiss between a gay male couple (Marino, 2011); the existence of entire cable (MTV Networks' Logo) and satellite radio (Sirius OutQ) channels targeted to LGBTQ individuals; the *New York Times'* elaborate multimedia site featuring stories from nearly 200 LGBTQ youth (Looram et al., 2011) juxtaposed against the same newspaper's history of notoriously homophobic coverage of gay men and lesbians (Alwood, 1996); and the exponential growth of print advertisements featuring LGBTQ individuals and the existence of

independent LGBTQ-targeted marketing firms ("2009 Gay Press Report," 2009). Yet on the whole, sexual minority media representation continues to focus almost exclusively on non-Latino gay White males whether in television, films, news, or advertising, and many of the same stereotypical and desexualized characterizations remain today (Branchik, 2002, 2007; Chasin, 2000; Clark, 1993; Gross, 2001, 2005; Milillo, 2008; Moritz, 1999; Phillips, 2011a; Saucier & Caron, 2008; Schulman, 1998; Sender, 2004; Smith et al., 2008; Streitmatter, 1995, 2009; Tsai, 2010; Um, 2011; Walters, 2003). Moreover, for years LGBTQ niche media have claimed a number of media stars either do not disclose or creatively avoid questions about their sexual orientation for fear of jeopardizing their commercial success by breaking through the "glass closet" (Musto, 2008), which is further indicative of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity's strongholds in structural institutions like the media.

Like most marginalized groups, LGBTQ individuals have circumvented narrow and often stereotypical media depictions in myriad ways, including the development of independent films and documentaries (Gross, 2001; Walters, 2003). In particular, the 1977 documentary *Word is Out* draws parallels to today's IGBP. Featuring coming out stories of 26 men and women, it was specifically produced because the filmmakers wanted gay men and lesbians to represent *themselves* in the media at a time when technologies available for them to do so were limited in availability and quite expensive. As Gross (2001) described:

> The core narrative of gay and lesbian identity at that time – and it hasn't entirely changed – was that of coming out, to oneself, to other gay people, to family, friends, and the world at large. The theory and strategy of the post-Stonewall movement was centered on the ideology of public self-disclosure as the key to psychological health for individual gay people and to liberation from oppression for the gay community. (p. 69)

While a portion of IGBP video producers share their coming out narratives in their videos or explicitly discuss their sexuality, the project's goal is to expose and fight sexuality-based oppression. Although the tools for distributing this information – and access to them – may have changed dramatically, the meaning behind the act of sharing has not changed much in nearly four decades. Gross (2001) asserted: "Coming out narratives connected individual experiences to shared experiences and thus solidified a sense of community and identity (p. 70).

New Media Representation

Long before the IGBP lessened the task of finding like others to a few keystrokes, LGBTQ Internet users took to the Web to help shape media's representation of LGBTQ individuals and provide youth and adults alike with counter-discourses to mainstream representation. Through Internet chat rooms and message boards (Clarkson, 2008; Cooper, 2010; Drushel, 2010), virtual communities (Barber, 2010; Berger, 2010; Edwards, 2010; Gregg, 2010; Hanmer, 2010; McHarry, 2010; Tsika, 2010; Whitesel, 2010), pornographic sites (Kibby & Costello, 1999; Mustanski, Lyons, & Garcia, 2011), and personal ads (Farr, 2010), individuals with same-sex attractions, behaviors, or identities have used the Internet to find like others for both (cyber)sex, platonic relationships, and social support since the 1980s (Clift, 2010; Gross, 2005; Lazzara, 2010; Mowlabocus, 2010). Moreover, LGBTQ individuals of all ages have gone online for the purposes of identity development and confirmation and to build or reinforce community through their overlapping experiences (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Pullen & Cooper, 2010).

Focusing more narrowly on new media, LGBTQ individuals have long utilized social media tools to present a wide variety of discourses and counter-discourses. Notably, YouTube was used to challenge media representation of Lawrence King's death as tied to bullying. King was a 15-year-old California high school student shot to death by his peer, Brandon McInerney, on February 13, 2008, on the basis of his sexual identity and gender non-conformity after King asked McInerney to be his valentine (Pullen, 2010). Youth and adults have also used YouTube for coming out stories and publically chronicling a relationship's life cycle (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Lazzara, 2010). Similarly, both the online extensions of offline sexual identities and the exclusively online expression of sexual identity have surfaced on MySpace and Facebook (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Drushel, 2010).

Because of the breadth and depth of LGBTQ online participation, Usher and Morrison (2010) went so far as to claim, "An LGBT person no longer needs to escape to the world of the Castro or to Christopher Street to find people like himself or herself; instead, all the LGBTQ person has to do is go online" (p. 280). Media consumers and/or producers no longer have to rely on studio, newsroom, or strategic communication agencies for LGBTQ media depictions, as they now have several tools at their disposal to create and disseminate their own LGBTQ images through social media, webisodes, web films, and much more. Furthermore, online participatory cultures afford Internet users "opportunities for delocalized storytelling that could never have happened without the Web" (Usher & Morrison, 2010, p. 278).

Online Participatory Culture

According to Jenkins, (2006a), participatory culture is defined as:

[a] culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another. (p. 3)

Frequently used to discuss events originating on or housed exclusively on the Internet, the phrase participatory culture has existed long before Twitter as a tool for Arab Spring revolutions (Marzouki & Oullier, 2012); Facebook as a tool for creating brand communities and "slacktivism" (Pfiefle, 2012); YouTube as a forum for coming out narratives (Alexander & Losh, 2010); or virtual worlds served as political campaign platforms (Jenkins, 2006b; Mullany, 2011; Shirky, 2010), and according to one scholar the lines between consumer, user, and designer within online participatory culture never were static (Fischer, 2002). Because online forms of participatory culture are central to this study, an extensive review of offline forms is beyond the scope of this work and thus is not included.

Online participatory culture has taken many forms over the past several decades, to include commons-based peer production, open innovation contests, wikis, crowdsourcing, and other forms of collaborative online output. Detailed information about the differences between these online participation formats can be found in Brabham (2012b), but suffice it to say that online participatory efforts vary in purpose, scope, level of and motivations for participation. Finding like individuals online offers many Internet users an opportunity for social interaction that may not be possible offline, including forging a sense of community. Further, it allows current and potential community members to partake in international efforts like the IGBP that were not feasible a decade

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ago because the tools were not readily available for the masses to produce and/or consume.

Numerous examples of online participatory culture exist pertaining to marginalized groups, such as the use of Facebook by southwestern Indian Hindu women as a vehicle for policy change and global discussion forums as virtual meeting grounds for those with chronic or rare diseases, such as PatientsLikeMe.com (Shirky, 2010). Marginalized groups can benefit greatly from elements of online participatory culture first and foremost because the Internet has the potential to make it easier than offline ventures to find like others – depending, of course, on the marginalized group. But for LGBTQ individuals, who for decades relied upon limited targeted media outlets and gay ghettos or bars to find one other (Streitmatter, 1995), the Internet allows them to find one another without geographical limitations. By the same token, online efforts afford a level of anonymity for those who have not adopted an LGBTQ identity or may be in the process of exploring their identity (Cooper, 2010; Gray, 2009; Tsika, 2010), particularly at-risk LGBTQ youth.

Marginalized groups use elements of participatory culture to include their voices in the broader Internet discourses, oftentimes with the goal of providing counter-discourses to the mainstream media precisely because of their long-term exclusion and stereotypical depiction. Additionally, participatory culture serves many functions beyond media representation, to include social change. Despite Savage's narrow articulation of the IGBP's goal of reaching at-risk LGBTQ youth, additional goals include positioning LGBTQ youth suicide as a social problem worldwide, garnering international news coverage, and generating revenue for itself and partner organizations.

As Internet scholars stress the importance of understanding how both the Internet and participatory online tools were developed and who controls these entities today in order to understand online ventures at the microlevel (Jenkins, 2006b; Pullen, 2010; Rheingold, 2002), they also assert that it is crucial to consider both the advantages and disadvantages afforded to all within online participatory cultures. Some advantages include the ability to find like others and communicate globally, relatively inexpensively, through a wide variety of readily accessible tools, at any time of day, whereas disadvantages of participatory culture concern unequal access to participatory tools, unequal pay and inaccurate titles for their work, and a fundamental misunderstanding of the potential benefits of online media. In brief, many social inequalities are merely replicated online as tools are more commonly used to exploit labor and turn a profit (Brabham, 2008, 2012a; Postigo, 2009; Schäfer, 2011).

Overarching criticisms of online participatory culture tend to center on three issues: access, commodification, and politics. Because of the Internet's global pervasiveness, it is quite easy to overestimate individuals' widespread Internet access or assume that the vast majority of individuals with access: a) can afford to pay monthly service fees; b) can actively participate in online participatory culture ventures; or c) have the intrinsic skillset to do so (Brabham, 2008; Fischer, 2002; Jenkins, 2006a). Internet access tends to be concentrated in certain geographic regions worldwide, and the variable technical infrastructure is intimately tied to the telecom industry's monopolistic hold on broadband accessibility (Rheingold, 2002), despite digital divide shifts in some U.S. states (Phillips et al., 2011b).

In addition to accessibility, Internet scholars have noted their concerns pertaining to the commodification of participatory culture and its ties to corporate culture. As Rheingold (2002) asserted, both the telecom industry and Hollywood have a stronghold not only on the infrastructure, but also on deeming what within participatory culture "wins." Despite what Schäfer (2011) termed flowery new media and online participation rhetoric, the product created within participatory culture is often subjected to judgment and validation by the mainstream media. Oftentimes the mainstream media co-opt products that individuals or groups have created, and more often than not only revenue-generating products are viewed as valuable and having long-term staying power (Schäfer, 2011). As Jenkins (2006b) lamented, the true value of participatory culture comes from process not the product.

The media environment continues to evolve, and researchers assert that there is significant benefit to allowing consumers to consume, appropriate, and redistribute modified content (Jenkins, 2006b; Rheingold, 2002; Shirky, 2010), yet the current legal framework favors traditional media corporations (Schäfer, 2011). In addition to legal concerns about repurposing copyrighted content, consideration must be given for corporate ownership or co-option of many participatory culture tools and the implications for policy development concerning privacy. To illustrate this point, the introduction of Google+ was more than just a new market entrant seeking to dethrone Facebook; rather, the tool must be considered as one of a plethora within Google's massive brand portfolio that grants the corporation increasing access to user information, which also extends to IGBP videos because Google owns YouTube.

Other scholars argue that participatory culture must be viewed through a political lens because it is not just about the tools themselves, but rather the social, cultural, legal, political, and economic implications of the creation and use of those tools (Rheingold, 2002; Schäfer, 2011; Winner, 1980). The political ramifications of their development *and* usage must be considered, along with the very discourses attached to online participatory culture that often default to deeming these efforts as inherently good (Schäfer, 2011).

In sum, scholars have argued for and against the Internet as a medium for liberating expression. The Internet is not the end all, be all; it will not and cannot solve all of the world's problems because the Internet's components themselves (re)produce specific types of problems, ways of thinking, and ultimately types of innovation (Brabham, 2008, 2012a; Jenkins, 2006b; Schäfer, 2011). Yet, online participatory tools do afford marginalized groups like the LGBTQ population an opportunity to remedy non-existent or stereotypical mainstream media representation by constructing their own images of what it means to be LGBTQ, including rarely-depicted racial, ethnic, class, gender, and sexual orientation-based differences within that population. Having situated the IGBP at the intersections of three bodies of literature (suicidality, bullying, and harassment; LGBTQ media representation; and online participatory culture) and begun the process of critically analyzing race, class, gender, and sexual orientation throughout these literature reviews, I now turn to explaining the critical framework used as a theoretical lens in this study: Collins' (2009) matrix of domination.

Theoretical Framework

Before I define the matrix of domination and articulate how the theory is applied in this study, it is necessary to explain that the matrix of domination is situated within the broader framework/ontology of social construction and is intimately intertwined with intersectionality. Thus, I offer a brief overview of both theoretical frameworks prior to the matrix of domination.

Social Construction

Branded as "a treatise in the sociology of knowledge," Berger and Luckmann's (1966) seminal book formally introduced the theoretical framework known as social construction and was intended to be a phenomenological study of everyday social occurrence. Asserting that it is of utmost importance that scholars not only produce knowledge but also question *how* knowledge is produced, Berger and Luckmann differentiated between ideas themselves and the processes within which ideas originate. The sociologists presented an alternative to essentialism whereby they rejected the notion of biological absolutes within social culture and introduced a vocabulary for common interpersonal social occurrences, and as would later be extrapolated, the construction of mass media representation.

In their treatise, Berger and Luckmann briefly discuss the construction of human sexuality, insisting that it is culturally (re)produced by various institutions that manifest themselves as historically constant. Over the past several decades, social constructionism has emerged as not only a theoretical framework, but furthermore as an ontology, and it has been greatly expanded upon by sexuality, gender, and mass media scholars, among others. Moreover, researchers have argued that individual producers'

and organizational constructions of gender and sexuality play a key role in mass media construction.

Building from Berger and Luckmann's assertion of institutional identity construction, Foucault (1978) and Butler (1990) explained how the institutionalization of sexuality and gender function as means of control, one outlet of which is the mass media. Through his "repressive hypothesis," Foucault (1978) contested sexology and described how discourses of repression – including but not limited to sexuality – are used to control individuals. Explaining how sexuality was an unnamed construct for decades, Foucault's historical analysis described how discourses were used first by structural institutions like the state and the family but have more recently been used in pedagogy, medicine, and economics. By socially constructing heterosexuality, it became privileged, with long-term effects for those who would become known as "homosexuals." It follows then that to Foucault, the mass media are just one of several institutions through which sexuality is maintained, the ideology of heterosexuality and homosexuality are named, and binaries are reproduced.

Butler (1990) echoed some of Foucault's sentiment regarding institutional control through her examination of the intersectionality of gender and sexuality and the formulation of "compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 24). Through the "heterosexual matrix," Butler contested the notion of gender as a biological construct tied to sex and argued that gender and sexuality are historical constructs. To Butler, gender is a performance done to ensure that heterosexuality maintains its dominance, and her arguments are applicable to how the mass media are constructed: they function as a vehicle for the dissemination of compulsory heterosexuality.

As influential thinkers within sexuality and gender studies, Foucault and Butler's works have influenced a long line of scholars, including studies about the social construction of sexuality (Seidman, 2010), masculinity (Kimmel, 2001), and race (Guess, 2006). The sum of this research asserts that ideological production within and the holistic construction of the mass media create, replicate, and distribute social construction on a mass scale.

Drawing from the concept of hegemony, Hall (1977) explained that the mass media's main function is not merely the reproduction of ideologies; rather, reproduction is one function within a "web of preferred meanings" that collectively serve to help construct the mass media. In total, Hall asserted that the media serve three ideological functions: 1) to construct; 2) to circulate what it has constructed; and 3) to give voice to those in power and restrict access to those who are not.

Several scholars have focused their social construction-rooted research on specific areas within mass communication, to include journalism (Barnett, 2006; Cooky et al., 2010; Friedman, 2008; McLeod & Chaffee, 1972; Pearson, 2007; Tuchman, 1978) and advertising (Branchik, 2002; Chong & Kvasny, 2007; Fejes & Lennon, 2000; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Ragusa, 2005; Sender, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). From extensive studies of how journalists construct reality through the use of the "news net," the "web of facticity," professionalism, and editorial hierarchy (Tuchman, 1978) to smaller scale studies on how women are portrayed in the news media (Barnett, 2006; Cooky et al., 2010; Friedman; 2008; Pearson, 2007), scholars have shown how journalism constructs and reconstructs gender in narrow ways as opposed to actively challenging the status quo. Advertising research on the social construction of HIV/AIDS discourses (Chong &

Kvasny, 2007), a gay market segment (Branchik, 2002; Fejes & Lennon, 2000; Keating & McLoughlin, 2005; Sender, 2003b, 2004), LGBTQ media outlets (Sender, 2003a), and news coverage of the gay market (Ragusa, 2005) offer additional insight into how the mass media construct gender, race, class, and sexuality.

Ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality construct what is and is not featured in the mass media, and conversely the media construct race, class, gender, and sexuality. The reciprocal process is ongoing, and evidence for this claim has been found within new media outlets as well (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Clarkson, 2008; Pullen, 2010). As articulated in the previous section on LGBTQ media representation, until recently, few LGBTQ media depictions have exemplified the intersection of racial, class, gender, and/or sexual identities, and perhaps as a result, intersectionalities have been rarely discussed in mass communication research.

Intersectionality

In the context of violent acts committed by men against women of color, Crenshaw (1993) argued that race and gender are intersecting entities, the combination of which affect social structures, politics, and representation, and defined intersectionality as "a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender" (p. 1296) consisting of an examination of between-group differences largely ignored by feminists and civil rights advocates alike. Asserting that a fundamental lack of understanding about the combined effects of race and gender led to differential health treatment, legal treatment, social services, and other injustices for women of color, Crenshaw (1993) also broached the subject of women's dehumanizing and one-dimensional representation in the media.

The intersectionality framework has been applied in media research, albeit sparsely. As Nielsen (2011) explained in her call for the use of intersectionality as both a theory and a method, intersectionality has been a common framework in gender studies, sociology, psychology, political science, education, law, business, and medicine, yet it has received limited attention in mass communication research. Scholars have applied the framework to public relations (Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010b), advertising (Gill, 2009; Rogers, 2008), and journalism (Cooky et al., 2010; Meyers, 2004), but fewer than a handful of intersectionality mass communication articles consider sexuality in their analyses.

Outside of mass communication, scholarly research on sexual orientation has explored intersectionality concerning identity politics within lesbian/queer communities (Alimahomed, 2010) and identity-development (Chun & Singh, 2010), and proprietary researchers have examined violence perpetrated against LGBTQ individuals (Grant et al., 2010; Mitchell-Brody & Ritchie, 2010). Others continue to conceptualize identities as "multiples" or "additive," whereby the intersectionalities themselves are not explored but rather viewed as binary and/or independent of one another (Collins, 2009; Nielsen, 2011). Examples of this "multiples" or "additive" research include some of the bullying, harassment, and suicide research previously mentioned as well as prior research on ethnic minority sexual identity development (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999).

The Matrix of Domination

Collins (2000, 2009) built upon Crenshaw's (1993) framework of intersectionality and asserted that intersectionality focuses on forces of oppression working together (i.e., race, gender, class, and sexuality), but it falls short of articulating the systemic

organization of power/oppression. Collins (2000) coined the term "matrix of domination,"

defined as "the overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions

originate, develop, and are contained" (p. 228). In further explaining that four elements of

power combine to form a matrix of domination, specifically the structural, disciplinary,

hegemonic, and interpersonal, Collins (2000) noted that each element is both dependent

on the others for a thorough understanding of oppression, yet each functions

independently:

> "The structural domain organizes oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain
> manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal
> domain influences every day lived experience and the individual consciousness
> that ensues" (p. 276).

> The shape with which this domination takes place has shifted temporally and

spatially, but in the U.S. systemic oppressions have surfaced in government, education,

housing, employment, and other social institutions, to include the media. Termed

"controlling images," Collins (2000) described how Black women's portrayals as

mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, "Black ladies," and jezebels/whores/hoochies

contribute to the matrix of domination, and she explained further:

> The media and other cultural institutions reproduce ideas by identifying which
> ideas are valuable, which are not, and which should not be heard at all. In this
> way, the ideas of groups that are privileged within race, class and gender
> relations are routinely heard, whereas the ideas of groups who are disadvantaged
> are silenced. (p. 275)

Collins (2000) also explained how sexuality is constructed in the media: heterosexuality

is the norm, and homosexuality is equated with deviance. In the media as in other

institutions, the groups to which one belongs become more or less salient depending

upon the situation at hand so that at times race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, etc.

may be a more immediate source of oppression than others. Nonetheless, that immediacy does not negate the existence or impact of other group memberships, and both unique individual standpoints and group standpoints exist.

The matrix of domination is offered in contrast to what Collins' referred to as additive models of oppression that call for the quantification and comparison of oppression across variables without an understanding of their interrelatedness. In later works, the matrix of domination was further conceptualized as:

> [m]ultiple, interlocking levels of domination stemming from the societal configuration of race, class, and gender relations, which affects individual consciousness, group interaction, and group access to institutional power and privileges. (Anderson & Collins, 2007)

The authors stated that otherness is formed through the use of binaries (man/woman, Black/White, heterosexual/gay and lesbian, etc.), and while all persons have both individual and group identities, these identities are socially constructed, but none are fixed. In reference to sexuality, Andersen and Collins (2007) described how homophobia affects both heterosexual and gay and lesbian individuals because of the normalization of the former at the latter's expense, with further implications for the related constructs of masculinity and femininity.

Scholars have provided numerous examples of the media's role in the matrix of domination, from rhetorical analyses illustrating how racism, ethnocentrism, classism, and sexism are endemic in the English language, professional sports, and other forms of media representation that depict certain groups in overly simplistic and sexualized terms (Churchill, 2007; Cofer, 2007; Malveaux, 2007; Mantsios, 2007; Moore, 2007), and Mantsios (2007) offered another explanation beyond depiction: the concentration of media ownership among a few affluent and predominately White male owners.

The role of sexuality within the matrix of domination has been studied outside of the disciplinary boundaries of mass communication as well in studies of the social construction of heterosexuality in sport and politics, and Messner (1996) and Rogers and Lott's (1997) studies both reference gay and lesbian movement forerunners to show how many common criticisms of the LGBTQ fight for equality have roots extending back several decades, specifically: 1) that there is one community, movement, and/or fight for equality; and 2) that diversity within the LGBTQ population is recognized within political and social organizations. Not surprisingly, these divisions have surfaced in the academy's study of LGBTQ phenomena as well, particularly within the divisions of social scientific, critical, and cultural studies research and the emergence of queer theory (Gross, 2005; Warner, 1999).

What becomes apparent in this theoretical overview is how the media as a structure are part of the matrix of domination and how the media are used to reproduce hegemonic ideals about race, class, gender, and sexuality. What is less apparent, however, is how the matrix of domination applies to new media, particularly that which has been commissioned and produced by LGBTQ adults outside of the institutionalized boundaries and rigidity of mainstream media. Using the matrix of domination framework as a theoretical lens, this study seeks further understanding of LGBTQ social media content and production by answering the following research questions:

1) How are race, class, gender, and sexual orientation discussed explicitly and implicitly within the IGBP videos?

2) What motivations do video producers' identify in explaining why they created YouTube videos and participated in the project?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

To answer the research questions posed above, I gathered empirical data using three methods: 1) a recruitment survey to collect demographic information about potential study participants; 2) multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) of qualified participants' IGBP YouTube videos; and lastly 3) qualitative, semi-structured interviews with IGBP video producers. In addition to explaining why each method was selected as well as how it was used to gather empirical data for this study, this chapter also includes a detailed explanation of how I recruited a stratified purposeful sample of IGBP video producers. Given the nature of this type of study and in line with Wodak and Meyer's (2009) assertion that "CDA researchers attempt to make their own positions and interests explicit while retaining their respective scientific methodologies and remaining self-reflective" (p. 3), before explaining my methods it is imperative that I offer a brief statement concerning my positionality as a qualitative researcher, specifically what led me to conduct this research and why I am uniquely situated to do so.

Positionality

Because this study centers on four aspects of identity in addition to motivations for IGBP participation, and because I subscribe to Dillman, Smyth, and Christian's (2009) social exchange framework for conducting research, I self-identify my own racial, class, gender, and sexual identities along with my own motivations for conducting the study. First, I self-identify as a White, cisgendered lesbian woman who is currently of lower middle class (yet highly educated) status but will soon be transitioning into the

upper middle class. As an out scholar who has focused my academic research on the intersection of LGBTQ individuals and strategic communication with a professional background in social media research, I am well-versed in multiple facets of the research process required for this type of study. Moreover, I have an intimate understanding of not only what it means to be an LGBTQ individual, but furthermore what it was like to: 1) go through the tumultuous process of questioning my sexual orientation as an adolescent; 2) deal with the ongoing process of and negotiations concerning coming out; 3) have contemplated suicide because of extreme feelings of depression, anxiety, confusion, self-loathing, loneliness, and/or a lack of knowledge about where to find and the confidence with which to seek out LGBTQ resources; and 4) grow up in a socially conservative environment with few positive examples of LGBTQ role models and little understanding of what it meant to be LGBTQ – beyond what I encountered in the mainstream media. Succinctly, I was once a member of the target audience that the IGBP now seeks to reach. As Collins (2009) remarks, "The same situation can look quite different depending on the consciousness one brings to interpret it" (p. 304), and while I believe this sentiment to be true for *any* research study, I am both qualified to undertake a study of this magnitude and passionate about the topic at hand, attributes of which are essential to any qualitative study that seeks to be thorough, to accurately represent its participants, and to be thought-provoking. Moreover, I also stand in solidarity with Collins (2009) in her assertion that "the primary responsibility for defining one's own reality lies with the people who live that reality, who actually have those experiences" (p. 39). Having explained my positionality and personal motivations for conducting this study, I

now turn to explaining how and why survey, MCDA, and in-depth interview methods were used.

Survey

The first method employed was a brief, 11 question open- and closed-ended online questionnaire housed on UNC's Qualtrics website, a copy of which is included in Appendix A. Through the questionnaire I obtained information from potential participants to create a stratified purposeful sample of videos and interview participants. For the sake of interviewing efficiency and to ensure that similar types of videos within the IGBP panoply could be analyzed, I purposefully selected U.S.-based participants of particular racial, class, gender, and sexual identities who had created individual IGBP videos, defined as videos in which a single person is featured providing her/his story of how "it gets better." Solo-effort IGBP videos were selected because they provide information about one individual's experience and allow for a richer exploration of the matrix of domination than do corporate, couples', group, or sports teams' videos featuring brief snippets of multiple individuals speaking within one overall message. Moreover, this study is focused on the everyday perspective of non-celebrities as it pertains to the matrix of domination as opposed to celebrities, and being granted access to celebrity IGBP video producers would have been extremely challenging and prohibitive in my attempts to uncover motivations for participation.

Because of the inherent problems of my attempting to ascribe labels of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation to individuals solely based on implicit or explicit information contained within their IGBP videos, the recruitment survey was established to allow potential participants to: 1) denote their interest in participating in the study; 2)

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self-identify their race, class, gender, and sexual orientation by selecting one or more options from a list of predetermined categories, typing their own label(s) into an open-ended text box, or through a combination of the two; and 3) provide me with a URL for their video(s). In accordance with the study's theoretical framework, adult lesbian or gay participants of varying social classes and gender identities were sought for this multi-method study in these four racial categories: 1) Black or African American; 2) Black or African American in combination with some other race; 3) White or Caucasian; and 4) White or Caucasian in combination with some other race. I fully acknowledge the narrow and exclusive nature of these stipulations, and my intent was not to perpetuate either the Black/White or Lesbian & Gay/Straight binaries. Rather, the selection of Black and White participants is both practically and theoretically driven: 1) these two racial groupings account for a combined 85% of the U.S. population according to 2010 U.S. Census data (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011); and 2) the matrix of domination was developed in the context of analyzing Black women's experiences (Collins, 2000). Questions of race, gender, and sexual orientation were structured according to those asked in the 2011 *Campus Climate: Regarding Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression* (Phoenix, 2011), with the addition of the "Black or African American in combination with some other race" and "White or Caucasian in combination with some other race" categories that were derived from the 2010 U.S. Census. The inclusion of these additional racial categories was my deliberative attempt to be more representative of how millions of U.S. citizens identify today: Multiracial. Furthermore, the question of class is based on Sociologists Thompson and Hickey's (2005) five classifications: 1) upper class; 2) upper middle class; 3) lower middle class; 4) working class; and 5) lower

class, and I provided participants with brief explanations for the differences between each class designation on the questionnaire. Because of the extensive time required to complete MCDA on more than 20 YouTube videos as well as the substantial data that resulted from numerous in-depth interviews, I opted to focus this study on the self-identified sexual minorities most prevalent in U.S. society today: lesbians and gay men. However, my intention is to revisit individuals of varying racial, class, gender, and sexual identities at a future date, in an attempt to be as inclusive as possible and to further understand the similarities and differences among IGBP participants according to these identities as it pertains to the matrix of domination and their IGBP participation. Lastly, I limited my sample to adults because in Savage's original call for IGBP contributions he specifically targeted LGBTQ adults.

My first attempt at publicizing my study and recruiting participants via survey research was to go directly to the source: the official IGBP website. I contacted the non-profit organization directly and asked if a link to my questionnaire could be included on the website's homepage so that site visitors - many of whom are video contributors, as revealed in the interviews - would be made aware of the study. I spoke with the IGBP's then Project Manager, Scott Zumwalt, and he informed me that because my research project was not officially sanctioned by the IGBP *and* the IGBP had received far too many requests to place information on its website from various entities, it would not be willing to endorse my study and directly post my link on its website. Therefore, I took another approach.

I used various free social media tools in order to advertise my study and drive traffic to the recruitment questionnaire, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. At the

time of my participant recruitment, the official IGBP website asked visitors to "connect with us" using both Facebook and Twitter. That invitation for interaction, along with the fact that the IGBP is a part of online participatory culture, led to my reaching out to potential participants using the same tools the IGBP used to promote itself. I acknowledge that only a subset of IGBP participants have ever "liked" and/or read the IGBP, Trevor Project, or GLSEN's Facebook pages and/or followed the respective organization's tweets on Twitter with any regularity, but because I was not striving for a (random) representative sample these limitations did not serve as a deterrence. It is important to note that the current iteration of the IGBP website includes links to both Tumblr and Google+, but at the time of my recruitment these social media tools were not being utilized by the IGBP. Therefore, I did not use them for participant recruitment. The three social media tools that I did use are discussed below in the order of usage.

Facebook

Boasting more than one billion users worldwide as of December 2012, Facebook is a dominant force within social media today ("Facebook Statistics," 2012), and it provides an excellent medium for the strategic distribution of targeted messaging to large groups. I began the process of disseminating the online questionnaire URL on the wall of the IGBP's official Facebook page in May 2012 as well as on the walls of its benefactors' pages: The Trevor Project and GLSEN. After doing so, I quickly learned that there are multiple, often regionally-based unofficial IGBP Facebook pages, so I posted my message on as many of these pages as I could find. Within the next two months, I attempted to find as many open access, LGBTQ-related Facebook pages as possible and posted my message on their walls, including LGBTQ for-profit and non-

profit organizations, media organizations, LGBTQ-identified and allied celebrities' individual pages, and regional LGBTQ group pages. The message I posted on several hundred Facebook walls can be found in Appendix B. In conjunction with these posts, I included multiple messages about the study within my own status updates and asked my Facebook friends to "share" these messages by reposting them on their pages, of which several did during May, June, and July 2012.

Twitter

In conjunction with the mass-mediated approach of Facebook, I used Twitter to disseminate the survey link, which afforded me the opportunity to contact potential survey participants individually and benefit from their online networks when they retweeted my message. First, I tweeted a very brief snippet of text about my research study and a shortened survey URL using the official IGBP (#ItGetsBetter), Trevor Project (#TrevorProject), and GLSEN (#glsen) hashtags so that anyone searching for these organizations would find my tweet. I requested that my Twitter followers retweet my tweets in an effort to increase the frequency with which my tweet would appear in the search results and hopefully to expand the participant pool. Next, I tweeted the study's information directly to the affiliated organizations using their official handles (@ItGetsBetter, @TrevorProject, and @glsen) in the hopes that these organizations would retweet my information to their own networks, of which only the IGBP did. I also tweeted Dan Savage directly (@fakedansavage); authors with active Twitter accounts whose essays/transcribed videos were included within the official IGBP book; all LGBTQ and allied individuals, celebrities, organizations, and groups listed on Wikipedia's IGBP page in June and July 2012; and as many additional LGBTQ-related organizations and

groups as I could find that were active on Twitter. My recruitment tweet can be found in Appendix C.

YouTube

By far the most laborious task for participant recruitment involved individually e-mailing IGBP video producers through the YouTube website. Offering another direct, personal approach to reaching potential study participants, I e-mailed several hundred individuals who had created IGBP videos posted on either the official IGBP website, IGBP YouTube channel, or whom I found by searching YouTube using the phrase "It Gets Better" (after examining the video content and determining they were indeed IGBP videos). My YouTube e-mail message can be found in Appendix D.

During the course of interviewing, I asked participants for feedback to determine the efficacy of these recruitment tactics. While all social media tools were effective in driving study participants to the questionnaire, 15 of the 20 study participants were directed to the survey because of the individualized YouTube e-mails; four participants clicked the survey link after seeing it on Facebook or Twitter; and one participant saw study information reposted on a Tumblr page by someone other than myself.

As a result of these recruitment tactics via Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, a total of 305 surveys were completed, but fewer than one-quarter of that number fulfilled the first requirement of study participation. More than 75% of survey participants marked that they *had not* created an IGBP video despite both my recruitment messages and the survey's landing page explicitly stating I was looking for individuals who had created IGBP videos. Within the remaining 25% of surveys from those who had created IGBP videos, only 24 individuals fit within the study's participant requirements for race, class,

gender, sexual orientation, and solo video authorship. Ultimately, the survey served two purposes: 1) it allowed me to ascertain viable participants for in-depth semi-structured interviews; and 2) it provided me with participants' IGBP video URLs in order for me to conduct the MCDA. Both the MCDA and semi-structured in-depth interview methods are described in detail below.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)

There are numerous definitions for discourse analysis, the overarching method under which critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach is situated. As Wodak and Meyer (2009) explained, discourse analysis is concerned with "naturally occurring language by real language users and contexts of language use; focuses on larger units than isolated words and sentences…beyond sentence grammar" (p. 2); and includes both verbal and non-verbal communication alike, including narratives, text, talk, conversation, language, monuments, policies, or political strategies. Not all discourse analyses take an explicitly critical approach, thus what separates CDA from other forms of discourse analysis is that it is specifically "problem-oriented" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2).

As one type of qualitative, interpretive analysis, CDA's roots date back to both critical theory of the pre-World War II Frankfurt School and the development of cultural linguistics in the United Kingdom and Australia a few decades later (van Dijk, 2001). CDA was solidified into a "school or programme" as early as 1991 by researchers convening at the University of Amsterdam: notably, van Dijk, Fairclough, Kress, van Leeuwen, and Wodak (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). As van Dijk (2001) asserted, CDA was developed by scholars in response to "asocial or uncritical paradigms" (p. 352) of the

1960s and 1970s and is multidisciplinary or "transdisciplinary" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 4) in nature, having drawn from linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, rhetoric, and the social sciences more broadly (Tracy, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Its development within capitalist nations was deliberate given that "the character of the economic system affects all aspects of social life," including but not limited to discourse (Fairclough, 2010, p. 3).

Notable scholars commonly associated with the continuous development of CDA include Fairclough, Huckin, Machin, Mayr, van Dijk, van Leeuwen, and Wodak, and not surprisingly, these scholars have put forth varying definitions and approaches to CDA while engaged in ongoing debates about whether CDA is a method as traditionally defined and what its ties are to various theoretical frameworks (Huckin, 2002; Machin & Mayr, 2012; van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This study draws from Fairclough and Wodak's (1997) definition of CDA:

> CDA sees discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of 'social practice.' Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s), which frame it: The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. (p. 258)

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) elaborated on the ties between discourse and power:

> Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects – that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people. (p. 258)

CDA's focus on power and ideologies aligns with Collins' (2009) remarks pertaining to the limitations of critique: while critiques of hegemonic ideologies are a necessary first-step in any process of social change, "empowerment within the hegemonic domain of power consists of constructing new knowledge" (p. 305). Offering a slightly different conceptualization of Fairclough and Wodak's (1997) definition, van Dijk (1997, 2001) stated that CDA is concerned not merely with power itself but rather with the *abuse* of power and domination, which is revealed through implicit meanings and hidden ideologies of texts "at the word, sentence, and passage level" (Brabham, 2012a, p. 398; Machin & Mayr, 2012) and aligns with Collins' (2009) process for conceptualizing the matrix of domination. Nonetheless, the intent of CDA is not description but rather explanation and intervention within social interaction and social structures (van Dijk, 2001). As Tracy (2001) stated,

> [d]iscourse analysis is situated within an interpretive social science metatheory that conceives of meanings as socially constructed, and needing to be studied in ways that take that belief seriously. It is: 1) empirical work, to be distinguished from philosophical essays about discourse; and 2) social scientific in worldview and hence distinguishable from humanistic approaches to textual analysis (e.g., rhetorical criticism). (p. 734)

As referenced above, CDA has been compared to cultural studies but also to rhetorical and content analyses, and scholars have been direct in their assertions that CDA is distinct and separate from the aforementioned approaches. As Huckin (2002) claimed, CDA varies from cultural studies because of its "emphasis on the fine-grained details of text and on political aspects of discursive manipulation" (p. 157), and to Tracy (2001), CDA's lack of a humanistic framework drawn from literary and film criticism, philosophy, and/or history distinguishes it from rhetorical analyses. Furthermore, while Huckin (2002) labeled CDA an approach and not a systematic method of analysis,

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Machin and Mayr (2012) noted that scholars can benefit from using CDA to answer their research questions instead of content analysis because comparatively CDA is a "more thorough and systematic analysis of language and texts" (p. 1).

Historically, scholars have used CDA most frequently to understand written texts, yet the IGBP is first and foremost a visual project comprised of YouTube videos; an analysis of transcripts alone would be insufficient to fully understand the explicit and implicit meanings video producers convey within their messaging. Meaning is conveyed through non-verbal elements as well, such as the video's setting, the producer's appearance (apparel, hairstyle, grooming, etc.), photos and text included in the video, and much more. For example, gender non-conformance is displayed by a biological woman with very shortly cropped hair dressed in traditional male clothing. Therefore, to account for both the verbal and non-verbal information within the IGBP videos, I used MCDA as outlined by Machin and Mayr (2012):

> [MCDA] denaturalizes representations of other modes of communication…[and] reveals the kinds of ideas, absences, and taken-for-granted assumptions in the images as well as the texts which will also serve the ends of revealing the kinds of power interests buried in them. (p. 9-10)

The next section contains specific information about MCDA as an analytic approach and how I applied it in this study.

How I Conducted the MCDA

To become intimately familiar with participants' videos, I rotated between repeatedly watching each video in its entirety and reading through video transcription of its content, which, when transcribed, resulted in 31 pages of single-spaced text. I followed van Dijk's (2008) approach, from which Machin and Mayr (2012) draw, which begins with identifying a small corpus of "problem-oriented" data to critically analyze (the

IGBP videos). Next, I examined "semantic macrostructures" (van Dijk, 2008, p. 68), or rather themes participants discussed within the IGBP videos. Following an examination of macro-level themes, I turned my focus to "local meanings" (van Dijk, 2008), investigating the meaning of words, sentences, and paragraphs participants used to express how life improves over time, while considering that "most institutional text and talk is contextually constrained by the specific aims and norms of institutional interaction and organization" (p. 69), in this case the IGBP structure itself. The final step included the "bottom-up and top-down linkage of [IGBP] discourse and interaction with societal structures" (p. 83), included in Chapter 6.

While iteratively watching the videos and reading the transcripts, I took copious notes and created a spreadsheet of my observations containing key information about what participants stated in their videos pertaining to what I saw as components of the matrix of domination (race, class, gender, and sexual orientation) at the micro and macro levels, alongside non-verbal information about participants' clothing, gazes, mannerisms, poses, video setting, camera angles, camera distance, and editing, which offer additional insight into these demographic variables. I gathered further information from that which participants made explicit, foregrounded, or legitimized as well as what they made implicit, backgrounded, or delegitimized (Machin & Mayr, 2012), with a specific focus on elements of their intersecting identities and the matrix of domination. I modified and added categories in an iterative fashion throughout data analysis when appropriate, always with a specific emphasis on interpreting how participants *explicitly* and *implicitly* communicated race, class, gender, and sexual orientation as separate identities within their verbal and non-verbal information. In accordance with how Collins (2009) organized

the demographic variables contained within the matrix of domination, I separated each demographic variable in order to understand how participants did (or did not) attribute that identity to their explanations of how "it gets better." The demographic variables were then combined with the interview data to draw conclusions about the role of the matrix of domination in the IGBP video content and production process, included in Chapter 6.

MCDA cannot speak to how viewers understand visual and/or textual information, nor can it speak to producers' intentions in creating the object of analysis. Because of that fact, critics of MCDA have remarked that failing to account for producers' intentions in creating texts/visuals results in incomplete and insufficient analyses predicated on presuppositions of their motivations (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In response to this criticism, and to fill the void, scholars in recent years have used multi-method approaches to ascertain information about content *and* production by combining MCDA with producer interviews (Machin & Niblock, 2008) or including MCDA as one component of an ethnography (Benwell, 2005; Machin & Mayr, 2007). This study follows suit in that it includes not just an MCDA of the IGBP videos but also semi-structured in-depth interviews to gain additional insights into the production process directly from the producers of that user-generated content. More specifically, the interviews permitted me to obtain a firsthand account of reasons *why* participants contributed to the IGBP as tied to the matrix of domination, information not readily available through MCDA.

In-depth, Semi-structured Interviews

Stating that interviews are "ports of entry into a person's worldviews or ideologies," Lindlof and Taylor (2011, p. 174) list six reasons why interviews are typically conducted, including obtaining information that other methodological tools cannot and

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permitting researcher understanding of participants' attitudes and behaviors through her/his own words. In the context of this study that sought understanding of participants' motivations for IGBP participation expressly *through their own verbiage*, it was essential to conduct interviews with video producers. Moreover, the interviewing method is preferable when explanatory information is sought from marginalized audiences about sensitive topics like LGBTQ identities, bullying, harassment, and suicidality (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

There are numerous types of qualitative interviews, the most common of which include ethnographic, informant, respondent, narrative, and focus group interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Respondent interviews typically involve one-on-one questioning with the objective of "finding out how people express their views, construe their actions, and conceptualize their life world" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 179). Differing from other interview types that may take place during the course of participant observations, ethnographies, or group feedback, respondent interviews are commonly employed when research questions dictate that comparisons be made across a sample or researchers seek "motivational interpretations" (Lazarsfeld, 1944, p. 40-47).

In the broadest sense, qualitative research offers richness, subjectivity, understanding, and the illumination of multiple realities (House, 1994), and how data are manifested is dependent upon the manner in which they are collected. Comparable to the existence of several different types of interviewing, there are also numerous ways in which interviews can be conducted; each has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. Technological advancements have not only led to vast changes within mass communication that fostered the IGBP's development and growth but have also

impacted the ways interviews are conducted. Computer-mediated interviews have been conducted through both asynchronous and synchronous communication forms: examples of asynchronous interviews include e-mail interviews (Ison, 2009; Kennedy, 2000; Lehu, 2004), whereas synchronous forms include text-based chat (Brabham, 2010b), Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) (Hay-Gibson, 2009), videoconferencing (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009), and video chat (Cabaroglu et al., 2010). In the next two sections I detail how the interviews were conducted and data were analyzed.

How the Interviews were conducted

Because of the IGBP's online participatory configuration, in which video producers record their testimonials through computer or smartphone technology, I interviewed video producers through the video chat service of their choosing – Skype or Google chat (as the latter was called at the time of interviewing but has been rebranded as Google Hangouts) – in an effort to replicate as closely as possible the environment in which the videos were filmed. Doing so allowed participants to designate the time and location in which the interviews were held. Interviews took place between 10 a.m. and 9 p.m. EST, with most occurring in the late morning/early afternoon, and a handful of participants were situated in the same physical spaces in which they filmed their IGBP videos. There are fundamental differences between the creation of an IGBP video, which is arguably a one-way form of communication targeted to a faceless audience, and two-way communication through a video chat service, and I assumed a level of technological sophistication based on video producers' IGBP participation that required verification. No one hesitated when I proposed an online-based interview, nor were there any *major* technical problems in using video chat.

The process of interview data collection included several steps. It began with an e-mail to participants to answer any initial questions they had, obtaining a digitally signed consent form, and scheduling an interview time using their preferred video chat service. Overall, a handful of participants opted to use Google Chat, whereas the bulk, 15, selected Skype. Google Chat provided a much smoother interviewing experience because it froze less often than Skype. When freezing occurred, I asked participants to repeat anything I did not hear adequately, but later in transcription there were a few instances in which words could not be made out, akin to conducting an interview in a crowded location where background noise drowns out participant and interviewer's voices. Nonetheless, the benefits of video chat-based interviewing far outweighed the technical glitches, permitting me to interview participants nationwide at their convenience, see them throughout the process to gather both audio and visual information, and videorecord these interactions using QuickTime for later analysis.

Interviews took place in July and August 2010, and to prevent researcher fatigue, I conducted a maximum of three interviews in any one day. To begin the interviewing process, I briefly reintroduced myself and told participants about the study's focus on motivations for participation. Some scholars recommend starting the interview process with nondirective questions to allow respondents to speak broadly about a topic and create rapport (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I followed this rationale by first asking participants to tell me about themselves. To quickly determine the efficacy of my recruitment methods (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube communications), I then asked participants how they heard about my study. On several occasions, participants misconstrued this question by providing rationale for *why* they

created their own IGBP video(s), and when this happened, I later reiterated this question but allowed them to speak freely about their motivations for IGBP participation. Additionally, I queried participants about where and when they first learned about the IGBP.

Typically, respondent interviews err on the side of standardization whereby the interviewer uses an interview protocol as a guide to ensure that participants are asked the same questions and comparable information is gathered for comparative analysis (Creswell, 2007). Throughout the interviewing process, I used a 19-question interview protocol viewable in Appendix E; actively listened to what participants said and probed them for additional information when needed; and reassured participants they could speak their minds about anything related to the IGBP, LGBTQ-related topics, race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. Moreover, I assured them of mutually beneficial information exchange to maintain rapport throughout, such that if participants asked me for information, I happily offered that to them. I made every effort to avoid loaded questions, having a negative tone, and/or using nonverbal gestures connoting attitude or judgment on my part (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), and I also tried to create a casual environment so that participants felt comfortable with me, as if we were simply having a conversation about their IGBP participation and not engaged in a formal academic interview. To convey this casual atmosphere while conducting the interviews, I was dressed very casually in a tank-top and shorts and deliberately seated behind my laptop's webcam. I was positioned in front of a blank white wall in an effort to keep the focus off of me physically and on the content of my questions and participants' responses.

Based on the interview protocol, I had anticipated the interviews would last approximately one hour. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted, ranging from approximately 44 minutes (Abbie) to two hours and 15 minutes (Kevin), averaging slightly more than one hour. My interview with Abbie was the first conducted, and as the study progressed, I became more comfortable understanding the nuances of when and how to probe these participants for additional information.

There are disadvantages to any type of interviewing, and video chat-based interviewing is no exception. Talking face-to-face is a different social experience than through a computer screen, and automatically there was distance created as technology stood between us. Establishing rapport, a crucial part of the interviewing process, can be more difficult through virtual means as well if the interviewer and participants only meet once through their computer screens, yet I found no discernible problems in establishing participant rapport. I was intentionally forthcoming about who I am and what my intentions were, and again I used my casual, summertime garb to dissuade the development of a power dynamic between participants and me as an authoritative academic researcher solely in control of the conversation.

After each interview, I made notes pertaining to my initial understanding of their motivations for IGBP participation. I then sent each participant an individualized e-mail thanking them for their participation, ensuring them of my availability for any further questions should they arise, informing them they will receive a copy of the study's results, and inviting them to "friend" me on my Facebook page if they desired to stay in contact and/or check on the study's progress through that medium instead of e-mail. Nearly all participants who had a Facebook account did friend me and have

corresponded with me in the months after the interviews were completed, indicative of their interest in the study. Furthermore, during the course of interviewing, each participant emphatically thanked *me* for conducting the research study and bringing further awareness to the IGBP, and one participant, Joe, said he was "honored" to have been interviewed for this study.

How Interview Data were analyzed

In continuation of data analysis, which starts when decisions are made about how interview data will be collected (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), the next step involved my hiring a transcriptionist – the same individual who had transcribed the IGBP videos for the MCDA. Unquestionably, doing full data transcription myself would have provided an additional layer of analysis, but the enormous time commitment of manually transcribing 20, hour-long plus interviews was avoided so that the bulk of my time could be devoted to data analysis, interpretation, and writing. I provided the transcriptionist with a brief overview of the study's purpose as well as thorough instructions for how the data were to be transcribed and formatted to ensure consistency. She transcribed all interviews within approximately one month's time, but upon closer inspection the accuracy of these transcriptions was problematic. Once I received the transcribed data, I listened through each interview to check the accuracy of the work, akin to coder agreement in quantitative content analysis. Unfortunately, the transcriptionist made several errors, from minor issues like misspelled words and incorrect punctuation to major issues like incorrect word/phrase transcriptions that completely altered a sentence's meaning, such as mislabeling LGBTQ acronyms or related terms, as has occurred in other LGBTQ-centric interview studies (Phoenix, 2008); sloppiness in confusing words like "impetus"

for "impotence"; and hastily marking phrases as inaudible due to low volume/computer freezes. I was able to fix almost all of these errors and decipher several of the inaudible notations due to my familiarity with the participants and the subsequent data, but doing so required several weeks I had not anticipated relinquishing to this task that was not required for the previous IGBP video transcriptions. The benefit of this extensive data-cleaning process was that it allowed me to become intimately familiar with the data. As I previously asserted (Phillips, 2011a), when additional coders or transcriptionists are employed it is preferable to use those who are LGBTQ-identified or adequately familiar with the terminology to prevent such inaccuracies.

To understand participants' motivations for IGBP participation, I began the next phase of data analysis by conducting a close, line-by-line reading of all 20 participants' transcripts, which resulted in 414 single-spaced pages. I followed Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) description of interview analysis "focused on meaning" (p. 201), which involved open coding, an approach derived from the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process of coding, which Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) described as "attaching one or more keywords to a text segment in order to permit later identification of a statement" (p. 201), was data-driven, such that I did not develop concept-driven codes in advance of data analysis. Thus, interview data were inductively coded using multi-colored highlighters to separate key words and phrases directly related to RQ#2, and hand-written codes were jotted down in the margins during the first round of coding. Additional full-text readings were done involving my iterative modification of codes based on what data surfaced in others' transcripts. I employed the technique of constant case comparison, often used in grounded theory, to compare each

interview against one another in an effort to find where participants' motivations overlapped and diverged from one another (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The next step entailed copying and pasting key words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs from the transcripts into one document to examine them in full. From there, I conducted additional readings to distill the information further and modify codes to begin the process of developing categorizations capturing the "fullness" of participants' motivations for IGBP participation (Charmaz, 2006). Multiple themes and sub-themes emerged from my categorizations, discussed in Chapter 5.

Although I pointedly asked participants what led them to participate in the IGBP, their motivations for participation were not confined to this one question. Rather, I intentionally built in additional questions to tease out this information, such as asking participants to tell me about themselves in the first few minutes of the interviews as well as subsequent questions about their participation in other anti-bullying initiatives and online and offline LGBTQ-centric projects/events. Often when asked to describe themselves, participants revealed information pertinent to motivations for participation, such as working or volunteering for LGBTQ-affiliated non-profit organizations. In sum, data resulting from the explicit question of "how did you decide to participate in the IGBP" were analyzed alongside implicit data resulting from other questions I had posed. The study's MCDA results are presented first in the next chapter, followed by the interview data in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE MCDA

Before presenting an analysis and discussion of both the MCDA of IGBP videos and the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the video producers, I begin this chapter by briefly introducing the 20 individuals included in the sample and on which this study is based. Given the study's theoretical lens, I offer an overview of participants' racial, class, gender, and sexual self-identifications and show that the very composition of the study's sample presupposes who is participating in the IGBP and willing to participate in a research study about the IGBP. Next, I offer my analysis and discussion of the data collected from each method.

Participant Overview

Twenty eligible individuals responded to my interview requests and were subsequently included in the sample. Half of the sample identified as White or Caucasian; six identified as "White or Caucasian in combination with some other race"; and four identified as Black or African American. No eligible survey respondents identified as "Black or African American in combination with some other race," perhaps indicative of few multiracial Black or African-American-identified IGBP participants overall precisely because of racial assumptions tied to for whom "it gets better." Absent a quantitative content analysis of the IGBP, it is impossible to say whether the sample accurately reflects overall IGBP participation. Furthermore, the gap between eligible individuals who identified as Black or African American (4) compared to those who identified as White or Caucasian (10) is also illustrative: White-identified individuals were

far more likely to offer themselves up as participants than were people of color. Based on verbiage from four self-identified Black or African American men, women, and genderqueer individuals interviewed and discussed in the next chapter, they surmised that people of color are hesitant to even create an IGBP video, much less to go on record and publically discuss it.

As for class, gender, and sexual orientation, seven individuals identified as members of the upper middle class; 11 identified as lower middle class; and two identified as working class. Thus, no eligible participants identified as upper class or lower class. With regards to gender identity and sexual orientation, eight females, 10 males, and two genderqueer participants are included within the sample; and nine respondents identified as lesbian and 11 as gay.

Although not a demographic factor explicitly included within Collins' matrix of domination, I asked participants to record their ages because of the inherent generational differences amongst LGBTQ individuals. Moreover, the terminology that LGBTQ individuals use to self-identify differs considerably based on their age (Schulman, 2013), and after watching several IGBP videos it appeared that age played a role in video content, expressly in detailing how and *when* life gets better. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 61 years old, averaging 35 years old, and they tended to skew younger: nine were in their twenties; three in their thirties; five in their forties; one in his fifties; and two in their sixties. A complete overview of the 20 participants' self-identified demographic information is provided in table form in Appendix F.

Although geographic location was also not one of the key factors outlined within Collins' (2000) original matrix of domination, she did speak more broadly about the

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impact of national identity in later iterations (Collins, 2009). This study is limited to U.S.-based participants, but I gathered geographic data from participants because of the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domain differences that exist across the U.S. Some of these domain differences include varying: 1) state laws concerning anti-bullying and hate crimes and whether LGBTQ individuals are included in those eponymous policies; 2) types of same-sex relationship recognition nationwide; 3) workplace protections and benefits for LGBTQ individuals; and 4) types of healthcare services, visitation rights, and medical provider knowledge available to LGBTQ individuals (*see* www.hrc.org). Accordingly, I was interested in whether geographic locale was pertinent to how participants described life getting better, particularly in recounting their own victimization.

The geographic breakdown of participants was as follows: four were from California; three from New Jersey; and one from each of the following states: Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maine, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. *Figure 1* illustrates these data and highlights the fact that the sample was heavily weighted toward East Coast residents, which may have been influenced by my attendance at an East Coast institution of higher education, the name of which I included in my calls for survey participants:

Figure 1:

Geographical Breakdown of Study Participants
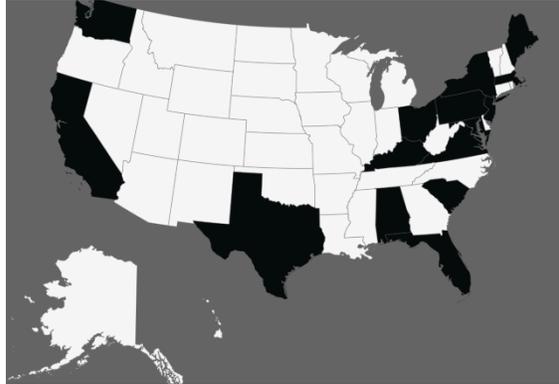
Notably, over half of participants hailed from states with some form of same-sex relationship recognition (California, Washington, New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts) and other institutional protections for LGBTQ individuals, demonstrative of the fact that one of the ways their lives have improved is through structural institutional protections.

IGBP Video Sample Overview

The sample consists of 20 individuals, but a total of 21 IGBP videos were analyzed, as Jordon stated upfront that he had created two IGBP videos. Viewership statistics, which provide the only publicly available IGBP metrics, are presented in brief to situate this study's sample within the IGBP overall and offer insight into the frequency with which these videos have been watched. All viewership statistics were gathered on February 6, 2013, and sample videos ranged in length from 46 seconds (Kim) to 13 minutes and 49 seconds (Greg), averaging approximately five minutes.

The sample includes videos uploaded from the first week of the IGBP's launch in September 2010 through May 2012. Twelve videos were uploaded to YouTube in 2010;

four in 2011; and five in 2012, demonstrating that the sample includes a broad distribution of participants in each stage of the IGBP's lifecycle.

Based on the descriptive data gathered, there does not seem to be a direct connection between the length of time with which a video has been on YouTube and the number of views it has received: video viewership ranged from 23 views (Joe) to 8,650 views (Sarah), averaging 1,768 views per video. To put these figures in perspective, Savage and Miller's video has been viewed 1,905,405 times. YouTube does not provide information about how views are tabulated, vaguely stating that view tabulations result from "someone watching a video on YouTube" and explicitly refusing to go into more detail to "prevent the artificial inflation of view count" ("YouTube Frequently Asked Questions," 2013). Typically, the more views a video has received, the higher the likelihood that viewers left feedback in the form of clicking on the like ("thumbs up") or dislike ("thumbs down") buttons. Viewers liked videos between one (Joe) and 89 times (Sarah), with an average of 19 likes per video. Correspondingly, viewers rarely disliked participants' videos, with the exception of Sarah's religiously-oriented video that garnered 17 dislikes, and there were no discernible differences within the sample as to viewers' like/dislike responses based on participants' race, class, gender, or sexual orientation.

Another indication of broader viewer engagement with the sample's videos is whether feedback was left in the comments section. The number of comments ranged from 0 (Andie, Kaali, Lauren, and Rafael) to 151 (Kevin), averaging 20 comments per video. There appeared to be some connection between videos with high viewership (Sarah = 8,650; Kevin = 4,140) and those with the most comments (Sarah = 102; Kevin

= 151), and the reverse was also true, such that videos with low viewership tended to receive the fewest comments, if any. While an in-depth analysis of viewers' comments is beyond the scope of this study, a quick glance of viewers' comments shows that bullying – the very behavior participants are combatting through their YouTube narratives – was present in several viewers' YouTube comments.

For just over one-quarter of the sample, their IGBP video represented their first and only YouTube video (at least using the account name provided), which may shed light on elements of video production, specifically the fact that some wrote out scripts and planned their videos in advance whereas others turned on the camera and immediately began speaking. The remaining 14 individuals uploaded other, non-IGBP videos before or after their IGBP video, ranging from a total of two to 147 videos with an average of 15. Complete descriptive viewership statistics including the dates that videos were uploaded, length of the videos, and number of views, likes, dislikes, comments, and videos produced by the participant outside of the IGBP are provided in Appendix G.

The inclusion of the descriptive data presented above serves to offer additional meaning to the study's MCDA, offered below, as well as to set the stage for the interview data analysis in Chapter 5. Each element of identity (race, class, gender, and sexual orientation) is analyzed individually, as the study's theoretical framework, the matrix of domination, is organized in order to answer RQ#1: How are race, class, gender, and sexual orientation discussed explicitly and implicitly within the IGBP videos? The data related to each identity element are compromised of both verbal and non-verbal communication analyses and labeled accordingly using sub-headings. Race is analyzed first.

Race in the IGBP Videos

Verbal Communication

Participants rarely discussed racial identity explicitly in their IGBP videos, but

when it was discussed, race was referenced in one of two ways: 1) in reference to *their*

own racial identity; or 2) in reference to the racial identities of *other people* in their lives,

such as spiritual mentors or bullies. Despite the presence of multiracial individuals in the

sample, participants discussed race only in the context of Black and White, and doing so

perpetuated the Black/White racial binary by neglecting biracial, multiracial, and myriad

individuals of other races. One participant was an exception, Deb, whose mention of

another's race outside of the Black/White binary is discussed in detail below. Explicit

mentions of their own or others' race came from two self-identified Black men; one

multiracial woman; and one White man. The remaining participants did not explicitly

mention race in any capacity.

Notably, before viewers click play on Kevin's video, the importance of race

appears front and center: He referred to his race explicitly multiple times in his video's

title, description, and content. Kevin titled his video "IT GETS BETTER: Elder Rev. Kevin

E. Taylor (Black, Gay, Christian and Proud!)," and his video description read as follows:

> Moved to tears by the IT GETS BETTER Project, living and pastoring in New
> Brunswick, NJ (where Tyler Clementi went to Rutgers) and being an openly gay
> pastor in the midst of the Eddie Long mess, I HAD TO SPEAK UP! It's important
> for little brown boys like me, little former fat boys like me, nerds and brainiacs like
> me, black boys who don't talk like everybody else like me, to know that IT GETS
> BETTER AND GOD LOVES YOU AND MADE YOU JUST AS YOU ARE! I am a
> pastor and a Christian and a Proud Black Gay Man and IT GETS AMAZING!
> (Taylor, 2010)

In both the video's title and description, Kevin identified as a "Black Gay Man," illustrative

of racial identity taking precedence over sexual orientation, and the importance of his

racial identity was further illustrated by the fact that he was the only participant to mention his race in either his title or description.

Coinciding with his forefronting of racial identity in the video's title and description, Kevin explicitly described being "raised a fat, Black, poor, asthmatic nerd in the projects of Southwest Washington, D.C. (Taylor, 2010)" early on in his energetic, ten-minute long testimonial. In his video, Kevin explained how the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, location, and age contributed to his experiences of getting bullied throughout childhood. Although Kevin explicitly mentioned his race just once within his video's content, his self-identification and broader discussion of intersectionality was the most detailed of any participant in the sample.

In comparison, Lee, a self-identified White man, mentioned his race only briefly within the context of preventing race-based bullying. Unlike Kevin, Lee made no mention of his White racial identification in either his video's title or description, nor did he discuss how the intersectionality of his racial and other identities impacted his life. Rather, Lee brought up race purely in the context of the White and Black binary and bullying:

> We can stand up when someone else is being ridiculed or bullied. We can stand up because what that does is we stop- if me as a gay, White man stops someone from telling a Black joke or stops someone when they say, "Oh you're such a retard," or "that's so lame," or a straight person says "hey" when someone says "that's so gay" and they stop them and they say, "Oh you know, I think that test may be stupid, but I don't think that test is attracted to other tests of the same gender." That's how the world starts to change. (Wind, 2010)

In describing this proposed intervention, Lee draws attention to the fact that racially-centered verbal attacks are morally wrong and perpetuate the overall culture of bullying endemic in the world today. Lee also drew attention to sexual orientation, gender, and

mental (dis)ability in his declaration on how to make life better, yet there is no mention of class- or gender-based harassment.

While Kevin and Lee were the only participants to self-identify their race, Joe and Deb explicitly mentioned others' racial identities in their videos. Joe, who self-identified as Black/African American, emphatically used a racial epithet when discussing his childhood victimization. In recounting his verbal abuse, Joe exploded in anger at his bullies and declared, "…fuck that shit. Fuck y'all niggers – all colors – fuck y'all with all that shit (exeggutor35, 2012)." Joe's use of the derogatory racial epithet is combined with an explanation that he was not restricting its meaning to just Black individuals, and he used the pejorative like hip-hop artists who commonly refer to others as "nigger," "nigga," or "niggah" in their lyrics. While reclamation attempts of "nigger" among Black-identified individuals are numerous and have been debated extensively in academia and popular culture for decades (Estell, 2005; Juzwiak, 2013; Kennedy, 2003; Marriott, 1993; "The Black Institute," 2011), "nigger" connotes hatred, disgust, and a lesser status, and the hegemonic use of the word by structural institutions, disciplinary institutions, and interpersonally is undeniably tied to Blackness (Kennedy, 2003).

Deb made no mention of her "White with Cherokee blood" racial identity in her video, title, or description, but she did mention explicitly her mentor's racial identity as "a woman of both Native American and European heritage" (songbyrd5, 2010). It is unclear why Deb does not mention her Native American heritage in this section of her video, but by neglecting to do so she missed an opportunity to explicitly discuss LGBTQ bullying from a multiracial perspective as well as to broadcast the experience of Native American

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LGBTQ individuals who are almost non-existent in mainstream media depictions (Graddick, 2011a, 2011b; Gross, 2001; Walters, 2003).

For the majority of participants who did not explicitly discuss race in any capacity, the omission could be attributable to a belief that they did not need to racially self-identify because the IGBP is a visual medium; therefore, viewers could discern participants' race simply by watching their video. Moreover, given that only one White/Caucasian participant racially self-identified in his video, there is a strong likelihood that participants were unaware of their white privilege and simply "did not see their 'whiteness' as a racial identity" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 103). As a result, the bulk of the sample identified as White/Caucasian and presumably deemed it unnecessary to racially self-identify because their whiteness was not a conscious component in either their childhood victimization or current adulthood. Taken a step further, most participants may have been unaware of what McIntosh (1988) labeled "unearned race advantage and conferred dominance" (p. 103), to the point where they had not considered how racial identity could impact whether viewers' lives improved.

Beyond McIntosh, scholars have explored racism and racial otherness extensively across several disciplines. Many have labeled the very idea of race as socially constructed (Byng, 2012; Collins, 2009; Cooky et al., 2010; Guess, 2006; van Ingen, 2003), and entire disciplines dedicated to critical analyses centering on race and ethnicity have emerged, such as Critical Race Theory and LatCrit. Guess (2006) asserted Caucasians' understanding of whiteness is studied far less, though it is equally important so scholars can theorize race holistically. Accordingly, participants' videos offer additional insight into how white privilege manifests in social media-based

communication. Highlighting participants' explicit verbalizations of race allows readers to

better understand how race is manifested within the sample, but MCDA calls for

uncovering the implicit meaning within texts. I now turn to how participants implicitly

discussed race within the IGBP.

With the exception of three self-identified Black/African American participants'

videos described below, the majority of participants postulated that racial differences do

not bring about distinct challenges for LGBTQ individuals. For example, in her video

targeted to "the gays kids of North Carolina," Abbie, who self-identified as

White/Caucasian, implied that all North Carolinians: 1) are equally invested in the fight

for marriage equality, as it is the top issue for *all* lesbians and gay men; and 2) are

negatively affected by the legislature's passage of Amendment 1, regardless of race.

Abbie discounted the fact that legal challenges and personal struggles related to

sexuality are multifaceted and tied to other demographic factors such as race, class,

gender, age, political affiliation, etc. (Collins, 2009), as illustrated below:

> I'm addressing this to the gay kids of North Carolina, and really I mean teenagers
> and preteens and whoever might feel like this is an identity that at least in part
> belongs to them. And you should be allowed to explore that for yourselves; you
> should be figuring that out; and you should not have to be on the front lines. And
> for that I wish I could be there, fighting with and for you, and I'm sorry that you
> have to be there right now because this should not be a battle that you have to
> fight at all. (Abbie, 2012)

Andie, who also self-identified as White/Caucasian, expressed similar sentiment

in her video's closing remarks while discussing "the" quintessential LGBTQ youth

struggle. In doing so, Andie rejected the notion of viewers' experiences differing from her

own as a function of both their intersectionality and the matrix of domination. Because

the core of Andie's struggle was coming to terms with her sexual, gender, and religious

identities, not race, she effectively concludes that race is not a factor for others either by making blanket statements:

> And so, it really does get better, no matter how hard you might have it. You just have to work for it; you just have to never let somebody tell you not to be who you are. (andy1535353, 2011)

Andie was not alone in implying life improves for all over time regardless of racial challenges tied to sexual orientation. As multi-racially self-identified participant Gregory proclaimed in the closing 30 seconds of his video, "And it's hard, but everyone finds their way," but he retracted it immediately, as if aware of the fact that that statement may not be entirely true, and he stated, "And I think it'll be unique for everybody" (SimmonsItGetsBetter, 2012). Similarly, Jordon, who also self-identified as multiracial, informed viewers that he was still in the midst of the very same struggle that they are presumed to be in and proclaimed, "Look, I know that it's hard. Trust me; I get it; I've been through it" (Bridges, 2010).

The general thrust of most participants' IGBP testimonials focused on one or more of the following: 1) relaying their own childhood struggles with sexual identity; 2) defending themselves from the verbal and physical abuse hurled by classmates, school administrators, fellow church members, and/or their own family members; 3) overcoming the self-bullying they engaged in as a result of internalizing others' homophobia; and 4) eventually growing into and accepting their sexual identities as either lesbian or gay. In close and repeated viewings of their videos, it became apparent that for many participants racially-based challenges were not a defining part of their own experiences as indicated by participants' word choice, phrasing, and sentence structure.

Participants' video content largely ignored implications of race and tended to create a myth that coming to terms with one's sexuality and overcoming bullying happens in due time for everyone: It is a shared, universal experience that varies little from one lesbian or gay man to the next. As she compared her experiences of battling addiction and maintaining sobriety with viewers' experiences of face-to-face and online harassment, Deb asserted, "If I can do it, you can do it" (songbyrd, 2010). Later in her video, she instructed viewers to take solace in and strength from IGBP participants: "…it definitely gets better, and if this isn't your experience right now, then draw from mine and from the countless others making videos" (songbyrd, 2010). Embedded in Deb's sentiment is the implication that: 1) all viewers will go through the same process of coming to terms with their sexuality and overcoming bullying in whatever form it takes (i.e., controlled substances or other people); and 2) they are capable of doing both because Deb and the "countless others" who have contributed IGBP videos have done that and more. Deb did not acknowledge that coming to terms with one's sexuality and/or overcoming bullying takes a different shape based on viewers' intersectionality, and for some, racial identity plays a role.

Part of participants' presumed universal LGBTQ struggle for self-acceptance, regardless of race, included their reference to fictional and nonfictional LGBTQ media sources and celebrities. For example, Lauren introduced viewers to the television series "Queer as Folk," "The L Word," and "The Real L Word," all of which featured either an exclusively White cast or had been criticized by LGBTQ bloggers for perpetuating a narrow vision of racial diversity (Elixher, 2012; kth14, 2010; Prof Sussuro, 2010), and Deb reminisced about the lack of available queer media role models while growing up,

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"like Ellen or Rosie," two affluent, White, self-identified lesbian women. And while Kevin offered examples of gay male celebrities through his mentions of former talk show host Nate Berkus and IGBP co-founder Savage, he mentioned only White/Caucasian celebrities. The implication is that people of color are non-existent within LGBTQ media because no mention was made of non-White-centric media, which is untrue (Kane et al., 2012). By neglecting to do so, participants reiterated Collins' (2009) assertion that the mainstream media, as one contingent within the structural components defining the matrix of domination, is dependent upon narrow depictions of racial identity.

Outside of mainstream media mentions, implications of race were apparent in others' videos: Joe shared his experiences attending a homophobic Black church; Kaali alluded to what it meant to be gay during her childhood; and Kevin referenced a Black gay youth's suicide, his own physical features, and the Black Church. Through a closer examination of Joe's verbiage it becomes evident that the combination of his racial, sexual, and gender identities contributed to his victimization. Nearly three-quarters of Joe's video was devoted to discussing hate speech packaged as religious scripture, and it was evident that the pain of those experiences – in particular being attacked by members of his own race – was still his reality. Joe's experience as a Black, gay, Christian youth is precisely what Kevin, a Black minister, tried to counteract in his video by putting forth a counter-discourse to homophobic Black churches/leaders.

Within Kevin's rhetoric are several implications of race. As the only participant to explicitly list the names of recent suicide victims, Kevin referred to the one Black victim whom the mainstream media referenced – Raymond Chase – subtly highlighting the fact that LGBTQ suicide cuts across all racial boundaries. Furthermore, later in his video

Kevin explicitly referenced some of his body's physical characteristics for which he was made fun of as a child, including his nose, posterior, and girth, and he implied that growing up as a young, Black, gay male carried with it additional physical baggage. Race was also implied through Kevin's speech patterns: throughout his narrative the very manner in which he spoke was indicative of his role as a Black preacher, as Kevin used rhythmic phrasing and paused for emphasis to get his points across:

> Trust that we are trying to get you to keep walking and keep coming because it gets better, and you will find a place where you fit in, in a group where you fit in, in a city where you fit in, and you'll realize that you are just everything you are supposed to be – even if you weren't born in a place or in a skin that felt right at the time. You will arrive at a place where it gets better. I promise you. I promise you. I promise you. Hold on. Hold out. Hold up because it gets better. I promise you. It gets better. I promise you. It gets better. (Taylor, 2010)

The very nature of the IGBP's structure may be in part an additional explanation for the types of formulaic, repetitive messaging included in participants' videos that did not explicitly discuss race (their or others'), the associated challenges of intersectionality as tied to race, or the myth of a shared experience in overcoming bullying that overlooked race. Because of the IGBP's singular focus on sexual orientation-based bullying, perhaps some participants interpreted the project's scope to be narrowly defined as focusing on *just* sexuality and life "getting better" as you literally and figuratively grow into your own skin, such that this was neither the time nor the place for interrogating or even drawing attention to the complexity of their own or viewers' presumed intersectionality. Instead, perhaps those conversations were thought best saved for other venues not targeting youth whom are already struggling enough as it is without further compounding the issue. In crafting messaging, IGBP participants negotiate the inclusion of their individual experiences while conforming to the explicit and

implicit standards outlined by the IGBP founders and contributors. To some extent, this process of conforming necessitates that participants overgeneralize or simplify their messaging, particularly in trying to stay within a reasonable time limit so that the intended audience receives their messages. The IGBP's structure is also at least partially responsible for the filler present in several of the videos: a repetition of the phrase "it gets better" with little explanation of not only what "it" is, but also what "better" means and what, where, when, why, how, and for whom "it gets better."

Non-verbal Communication

In conjunction with participants' verbal communication, their non-verbal communication was also examined for implications of race. With the exception of Kevin's video, any explicit symbols of race within the videos' visual design were also noticeably absent. Kevin was seated behind a desk in his apartment with his hair in cornrows, and over his right shoulder was a small table filled with personal, framed photos of friends and family members, nearly all of whom had a skin tone close to his own dark brown complexion. Above the table were several photos of the same composition. The presence and placement of these photos function as a deliberate statement of racial solidarity and membership within the Black/African American community in that his sexual orientation and "out and proud" behavior do not preclude him from being loved and from loving others in his racial community. Moreover, the inclusion of racial identifiers and the exclusion of sexual orientation identifiers (i.e., rainbow flags, etc.) further indicate Kevin's racial identity is front and center. A screenshot of Kevin's IGBP video is below in *Figure 2:*

IT GETS BETTER: ELDER REV. KEVIN E. TAYLOR
NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ (RevKev@UFCCNB.org)

Collectively, race was largely ignored within the explicit video content but implicitly its presence was much stronger. Race-based implications surfaced with greater frequency throughout the sample in comparison to the explicit comments that were relegated to just a handful of participants. In consideration of the visual elements that comprised the IGBP videos, there were few discernible differences between participants who self-identified as Black/African American and everyone else in the sample. As such, the implication was that racial differences between LGBTQ individuals are relatively non-existent, and the combined sparseness and similarity of many participants' backgrounds presented a collective image further contributing to the universal myth of a shared experience and ignoring racial differences. As will be described in the next section, most participants had a tendency to treat class identity the same way.

Class in the IGBP Videos

As with race, when participants explicitly discussed class in their videos, it was done in one of two ways: 1) referencing their own class level; or 2) assuming viewers are of middle class or higher. More pointedly, participants' class-based verbiage was

typically comprised of statements pertaining to elements of class level, including: 1) their own *real*; or 2) viewers'/others' *perceived* financial situations or levels of education.

Participants' sentiment about *their own* financial situations concerned their current occupations, living situations, disposable income, and/or relationship and parental statuses. Several participants explicitly referenced their occupation, either within the verbal content of their videos or in their videos' written descriptions. A complete breakdown of participants' occupations is included in Appendix H.

Often, participants' occupational references were made almost in passing, with little information put forth about what they do in their current roles, how they got there, etc. However, for Jordon and Sam, both discussed their occupations in the context of striving for financial independence while in their early twenties. Jordon explained:

> So after that first one [IGBP video], I continued in community college, living in that very small-minded town, and then back in March of this year I wound up in the hospital for 16 days. I found out that I had celiac disease and a few other things. But that time allowed me to really reflect on what I needed to do, and I came to a realization that I needed some sort of financial stability to allow me to get out of that town, to continue to college. And so I wound up in North Dakota of all places as a diesel mechanic on a very small reservation, and I made really decent money actually, and it got me to where I am now, which is in California at school, at a place called PCPA, which is the Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts. (Bridges, 2011)

Jordon does not go into detail about why he ventured from Washington to North Dakota to seek employment, but what he stated explicitly is that he was compelled to leave his small town – at all costs – and procure a job traditionally considered to be blue-collar work. Implicit is the notion that viewers also may be able to follow his lead and leave their hometowns as well.

For Sam, joining the military provided an avenue for financial independence and an opportunity to travel the world as is common for young service members. Within the

military's own recruiting materials, nearly half of the reasons outlined to join the military are class-centric: education, money, medical coverage, etc. (Howell & O'Brien, 2011). Few out individuals willingly take on employment within a known, homophobic work environment unless out of necessity. Sam stated: "I joined the military when Don't Ask, Don't Tell still existed. And, even though it was hard to live in that environment sometimes, I came out OK" (SamMal13, 2012).

In contrast, Kile and Thomas did not mention their current occupations, but their sentiment revealed disposable income/time likely a result of those occupations. Kile participated in the last four Gay Games in Europe, Australia, and the U.S., an alternative to the Olympic Games in which athletes proudly display their sexuality as opposed to having to hide it (Burra, 2012). Presumably Kile spent years in training, indicative of disposable income and time:

> You could even get a medal for being gay - did you know that? You can get a medal for it at the Gay Games simply by showing up and walking onto the field as an athlete you get - this is from Amsterdam in 1998. I got a medal for being gay. And then, let's see: Sydney in 2002, I got a medal for being gay. I swam, but I got the medal for being gay. Let's see, Chicago in 2006: everybody got a medal for being gay. Look at this! Get out of high school; look at what is waiting for you. This is for Cologne, just 2 months ago, a medal for being gay. I competed in bodybuilding, but I didn't get a medal - but I did get one for being gay because I'm good at that. (Ozier, 2010)

Thomas did not speak of international travel or athletic competitions, but he did reference donating his time and money to LGBTQ rights' organizations, exhibitive of his disposable income/time:

> When rights organizations hem and haw about taking baby steps to securing the full rights each and every person fully deserves - be they straight, gay, lesbian, bi, trans, queer, questioning or any combination - I will ask them to grow a backbone or I will move on with my support with my time and money to organizations working for real change for everyone now. (Tproa, 2010)

In encouraging viewers to travel internationally or be cognizant of where they donate

their money, the implication is that viewers *have* disposable income to spend on either of

these luxuries.

Echoing Thomas' sentiment about LGBTQ rights, specifically marriage equality,

Abbie lamented her frustrations at not being able to physically join North Carolinian

youth in their Amendment 1 battles:

> I wish I could be there with you. I wish I could put my arms around you; I wish I
> could stand with you on the frontlines because it is not fair that you are being
> placed on the frontlines of this battle. (Abbie, 2012)

There is an implication of helplessness within Abbie's rhetoric, as if North Carolina youth

cannot survive on their own and literally need to be cradled like infants. Endemic in her

video is the broader implication that marriage inequality affects all gay kids the same –

despite their class levels – and that marriage equality is their most pressing concern.

Numerous LGBTQ individuals have argued that the marriage equality battle that has

dominated the "LGBTQ movement" for years is itself classist (Burns, 2012; Dettmer,

2010; Flores, 2012), as it is illustrative of those in power (i.e., White, gay men; middle

class or higher) advancing their own causes while neglecting more pressing needs (i.e.,

economic justice). Furthermore, Abbie filmed the video in her private college dorm room,

adding distance between herself and the infantilized NC youth, regardless of

intentionality.

Additional class-laden rhetoric surfaced when participants discussed their current

living situations. While referencing Tyler Clementi's suicide, Kevin noted the type of

dwelling he resided in:

I am sitting here in my apartment in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where I spent all day yesterday on the campus of Rutgers with many of the young you's that you're going to become if you hold on. (Taylor, 2010)

It was clear from Kevin's video that he jumped class levels as an adult: he is no longer poor and residing in the projects of Southwest Washington, D.C. Kevin's sentiment was characteristic of upward class mobility, which Columbia University Economist Howard Friedman (2012) argued is much rarer in American society than most Americans truly understand. As will be discussed later in this section, when participants made assumptions about *viewers'* class levels, often they did so under the pretenses of viewers either: 1) being middle class or greater; or 2) having the inherent ability to be upwardly mobile (as Kevin did). Suffice it to say, both assumptions are patently false based on 2010 U.S. Census Data and in turn are problematic (Francis, 2012).

When Jill talked about her current happiness, it was in part due to her relationship with her fiancée and their present and future (aspirational) economic situations: "Last year, we bought a condo together that we love living in. We plan to get married here in Maine next fall, and we want to raise our family here" (Portland Phoenix, 2010). There are inherent costs associated with getting married, even if doing so entails little more than physically going to a local courthouse to apply for a marriage certificate. Additionally, having children as part of a lesbian partnership that forgoes the standard route to conception can be an extremely costly process (Parker, 2012). None of these costs are discussed outright; rather, they are presented as natural progressions on the lesbian path of life.

Others disclosed raising children and currently being married to their respective wives or husband, again indicators of their class levels given the high costs associated

with raising children and having a wedding ceremony. Specifically, Kaali identified herself as "a same gender-loving individual, happily married with a wife and a daughter," and she included very traditional and heteronormative wedding ceremony, reception, and honeymoon photos in her video's opening 15 seconds (kynshaune, 2010). Given the formal attire, numerous guests, setting, decorations, and consumption of tropical beverages under palm trees in the photos, it appeared to be a costly celebration, again exhibitive of disposable income. The four photographs are displayed below in *Figure 3:*

Figure 3:

Once again, no reference is made to the costs associated with the festivities. Showing personal photos can offer hope to youth who may not think lesbian marriage is a possibility for them, but it is problematic if young viewers walk away without a fundamental understanding of the inherent costs, and that it is not a given for all.

Alongside financial comments, participants commonly divulged their education levels. In total, three-quarters of participants referenced either their current status as an undergraduate or graduate student or having gone to college and/or graduate school in the past. Hence, the sample unquestionably contained those fortunate enough to further

their educations or procure scholarships, perhaps rendering them that much more appreciative of and likely to participate in an academic study. Among the remaining participants, nearly all disclosed obtaining a college degree or higher in their interviews. The idea that a college education is within financial or intellectual reach for everyone is not accurate, yet participants' rhetoric treated college as a natural progression.

Participants' education-related commentary extended back to their K-12 experiences as well as summer activities, which were illustrative of their families' class levels while growing up. Dennis, Jill, and Rafael attended private schools for either a portion or the entirety of their K-12 schooling, and David and Deb went to summer camps. By designating they attended either, participants (un)intentionally created distance between themselves and viewers who are not of a class level where private education or summer camps are financially feasible.

Taken as a whole, participants presented an image of gay and lesbian adulthood consisting of choice, disposable income, class mobility, and degrees from institutions of higher education. As they described leaving their homophobic hometowns behind in search of something better, a desire to get married and have children (or already having done so), or having the freedom to choose the type of employment they would seek, it was evident that many participants were unaware of their own class privilege. Viewers may be left thinking that in the future, they too will be afforded the opportunities participants nonchalantly discussed in their videos, but it is precisely because of the matrix of domination that all *are not* afforded these opportunities. Likewise, not all are presently attending private schools or summer camps, nor might they have the financial capacity to see a licensed therapist. Thus, class-based rhetoric could have the opposite

effect intended and turn viewers away from the IGBP because of participants'

(un)intentional class divide just as it has turned away potential contributors (Hell, 2012;

Kerry, Christy, & Em, 2013).

When participants commented about *viewers'* perceived financial situations, their

comments centered on the notion of life getting better once viewers finish (K-12) school

and have the resources available to leave their hometowns, sentiment explicit within

Savage and Miller's video. As Kevin described, life will get better because viewers will

have financial resources for mobility:

> All the people who are telling their stories are not saying this to you so you just
> don't do that, but so that you get here and get to fall in love, and get to get love
> letters, and get to go to concerts, and get to travel, and get to move outside of the
> four walls of your house if your parents don't understand or your siblings are not
> supportive; outside of the streets that call themselves your neighborhood, and find
> a new school and new friends and find the other you.

He continued:

> Trust that we are trying to get you to keep walking and keep coming because it
> gets better, and you will find a place where you fit in, in a group where you fit in, in
> a city where you fit in, and you'll realize that you are just everything you are
> supposed to be. (Taylor, 2010)

Kevin predicted viewers would have a future life where Internet access is a given,

whereas Rafael made the assumption that Internet access was a present reality for

viewers. Certainly that assumption is tempered somewhat in considering that the IGBP *is*

an online entity and to view Rafael's or Kevin's videos, viewers must have Internet

access on a mobile or stationary device. However, it is also possible that viewers may be

watching the videos on another's device, at school, a public library, etc., if they have

Internet access at all. Nonetheless, coinciding with Rafael's assumption of Internet

access was the supposition that viewers could find the support they needed:

> For the young people out there, it does get better. It is tough. There are resources. It's not like it was back in the 1980s where there were not as many resources. With the Internet, you can find places, you can find people to talk to. Take advantage of that. (ResourceCenterDallas, 2010)

Because Rafael works for a brick-and-mortar LGBT organization, the presumption is that he was referencing brick-and-mortar organizations where viewers could seek resources. Certainly, LGBTQ-centric brick-and-mortar organizations are more plentiful now than in the 1980s, yet there are not LGBTQ centers within driving distance of all potential viewers nor do all have transportation to and from these centers. Alternatively, Rafael may have been referring to online resources, which are predicated on viewers having private, readily available Internet access and an inherent ability to distinguish between legitimate LGBTQ organizational websites and pornography, LGBTQ hate groups' websites, etc. Moreover, no acknowledgement was made of the tremendous courage required of questioning youth simply to search for LGBTQ-specific resources, and instead the mere presence of resources is erroneously equated with viewers' readiness to seek them out.

Thomas echoed Kevin's sentiment about viewers' ability to move to a geographic locale best suited for their unique LGBTQ needs:

> But I truly do believe that it does get better, and while there is still way too much repression of people because of their sexuality or their identity, there are places all over this nation where you can live your life comfortably and openly – large cities and small – no matter which letter of the LGBTQA you fit into. (Tproa, 2010)

He refrained from simply listing "large" areas known for their concentrations of gay men (West Hollywood, The Castro, or Chelsea) or lesbians (Park Slope, Northampton), though Thomas did not indicate where these lesser-known "small cities" are located, how viewers would get there, or the fact that gay ghettos (in "large" cities) historically have

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been segregated by gender (Gates, Ost, & Birch, 2004). Moreover, Thomas concluded that viewers are not presently living within any of these areas but either can or will have the resources available to pick up and relocate to one of them, as he did.

Others were less explicit in their claims of how life will improve post-high school and had a tendency to make non-descriptive assertions about what is on the other side, regardless of viewers' class levels. Examples include Kile's proclamation, "Get out of high school; look at what is waiting for you" (Ozier, 2010), and Deb's assertion that, "If I can do it, you can do it. Nothing is forever. There's a better life waiting for you at the end of school" (songbyrd5, 2010). While Lee reiterated the notion of life getting better once viewers finish their K-12 education, he also questioned the simplicity of that oft-repeated message as well as the pronouncement that life magically improves with time:

> As soon as you get out of school you are not surrounded by all these jerks, and life does get better. But it shouldn't just be a message about "hold your breath until you get out of high school or junior high. Life will get better when you're older." (Wind, 2010)

Inherent within participants' generalizations is the belief that there are no discernible differences between viewers' class levels *and* class level does not impact how life gets better. No attention was paid to the fact that physically removing yourself from a geographic locale requires financial capital as does participating in various LGBTQ-themed activities and organizations. More broadly, participants perpetuated a similar myth about class as they did about race through making gross generalizations about viewers' presumed class levels, ignoring class differences altogether, or projecting their own class levels/mobility onto others. The reality is that before viewers' lives improve, they must survive their current situations. Viewers' current realities likely include an onslaught of harassment within the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and

interpersonal domains, and few participants offered tangible, non-classist advice on how viewers' could improve their *current* situations.

Abbie was the exception, and she spoke to the reality of many youth, "You probably don't have the option to leave where you are right now – and you may not even want to" (Abbie, 2012). Amongst participants, Abbie was alone in her acknowledgement of viewers' limited resources and that they may not desire to relocate. Leaving a hometown is a much deeper psychological process than merely scraping together enough money to do so, yet most participants ignored that completely and in turn are presenting most viewers with what might be false hope.

Classism was also evident in how participants discussed viewers' bullies, presuming bullies were less educated and ignorant overall. As Deb matter-of-factly pointed out, "So if you're being bullied by kids in school, they're just acting out of their own ignorance." She immediately followed up that comment with instructions: "Don't let someone else's stupidity screw up your life. It gets better" (songbyrd5, 2010). Comparatively, Joe's colorful language exhibited assumptions about both his own and others' bullies. In describing his own bullies, Joe's rage at being the victim of their verbal attacks was evident, and, ironically, he engaged in the same name-calling behavior as his attackers:

> But a lot of people, a lot of ignorant motherfuckers, make it their business to try and make your life miserable. And I will share a little bit about my life so that I can let you know because this has been reinforced; I know what it's like. (exeggutor35, 2012)

Moreover, David's remarks indicated that some bullies' stupidity is long-lasting:

> Some of these people will apologize to you later on, and some of the idiots, some of them will remain idiots, and there's not much that you can do about that. But some of them will grow up and they will ask you to forgive them, and it's worth

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waiting for that. And I can tell you as a rabbi that if anybody, anywhere is telling you that your being gay, your being queer, your being trans, that your being you is something that God doesn't like, that God hates, God disapproves of – it's bullshit, and they're lying, and they don't know what they are talking about. They are probably not bringing anywhere near the right frame of mind, the right appreciation to sacred text that they ought to. (Bauer, 2010)

David drew attention to his occupation as a rabbi and the associated knowledge required while asserting that bullies do not have the religious acumen or self-awareness that viewers do.

Abbie took aim at an entire state, North Carolina, when she labeled it "a place where blatant, institutionalized discrimination exists" and later informed viewers that, "Things are better in some places, and it's so important for me that you know you are not alone" (Abbie, 2012). Whether intentional or not, she drew a stark contrast between states progressive enough (i.e., with enough education/of a certain class level) to extend legal protections to LGBTQ individuals and those that are not. She further informed viewers of the "outrage" amongst presumably educated folks worldwide to NC Amendment 1:

And let me tell you what the response around the country has been to North Carolina passing this amendment – it is so in your favor. It is outraged on your behalf, and you need to know that. You need to know that I support you; you need to know that you are supported by so many people. (Abbie, 2012)

On the whole, what participants insinuated in their videos is that bullies are inherently less educated and by default of a lower class level than viewers. Bullies' presumed ignorance, lower class status, and lower levels of education extended to sexuality, religion, and politics. In distinguishing between viewers and bullies' class levels, participants created an "us versus them" dynamic, which only serves to further isolate one group from the other and does not "make it better."

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Non-verbal Communication

In conjunction with the verbal information participants explicitly and implicitly connoted, on occasion indications of class were apparent within the non-verbal information contained in video settings. For example, had Abbie not identified herself as a Williams College student, the desk full of books, professional-grade racing swimwear hanging on the wall, and the exploding closet full of clothes behind her could have alerted viewers that she was in a college dorm room:

Figure 4:

Andie, who was dressed in what looked like a leather moto vest and was seated at a desk cluttered with textbooks and personal trinkets, also looked the part of a collegian.

In contrast to Abbie and Andie's clear visuals of collegiate life, it was not made visibly identifiable that Kim, Gregory, and Jordon were (under)graduate students. Nonetheless, Kim identified herself as a member of a prestigious institution of higher education, and she was dressed in a Ralph Lauren Polo-branded oxford dress shirt, indicative of disposable income to spend on branded apparel. Gregory self-identified as a graduate student attending a private institution of higher education, yet both he and Jordon (within his first video) were dressed in non-descript hooded sweatshirts that did not reveal much about their class levels.

The visual backdrop of others' videos provided class-based information, such as bookcases stacked full of books, that could potentially lead viewers to insinuate participants are educated/well-read. When paired with David and Thomas' collared dress shirts, the visual information denoted professionalism. As for Lee, a self-identified professional writer, blogger, and speaker, as indicated on a banner featured in the

beginning of his video, further class-level information was communicated through his self-promoting long-sleeved t-shirt. Not only is he a professional writer, but Lee also has a marketing budget with which to create specialized apparel and time to strategize how to use his IGBP video as a marketing tool. Furthermore, Lee is seated behind what appeared to be a large, uncluttered, high- quality L-shaped desk featuring a globe and ample storage space, also indicative of disposable income.

Some participants' apparel was indicative of class, though most were dressed casually. Kaali was dressed in a pristine, perhaps brand-new Philadelphia Phillies baseball cap and large diamond earrings and was seated in front of matching bedding and window dressings as well as a wooden chest of drawers:

Figure 6:

In a similar fashion, Lauren was dressed in a sweater vest and men's collared shirt, seated in her bedroom and surrounded by a gold-spiraled bedframe, window dressings, artwork, and houseplants. Both participants apparel choices and bedroom décor are exhibitive of the fact that they both have disposable income to spend on non-essentials.

In about one-half of the videos, explicit class-based information was indeterminable, in large part because participants were seated in front of completely bare or minimal backdrops. In the case of Rafael and Sam, their backdrop and clothing choices, respectively, offered further information about their occupations and drew attention to their class levels, as Rafael was deliberately situated outside of his workplace, Resource Center Dallas, and Sam wore her Army fatigues.

Participants' apparel choices and video settings either corroborated their class-based verbiage or offered additional, unspoken insight into their class level. At times it was nearly impossible to distinguish between participants of working, lower middle, and upper middles classes because there were relatively few differences between their apparel. Case in point, there were no discernable differences between Jordon's (working class), Gregory's (lower middle class), and Kristin's (upper middle class) apparel. Nearly the same can be said for video settings: At times there were no discernable differences between working class (Jordon), lower middle class (Gregory), and upper middle class (Kristin) participants, especially in videos shot against blank backdrops. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that participants who self-identified as working class, Jordon and Deb, created videos with blank white backdrops, whereas Kristin's blank canvas was rare amongst self-identified upper middle class participants who more commonly had video backdrops full of books or other personal items. As became apparent in the course of interviewing, for some participants these apparel and setting choices were deliberate whereas for others they put little thought into what they were wearing, where they were seated, or what was behind them, instead focusing on their sense of urgency to post a

video. Overall, participants' verbal communication offered far more insight into their class levels than their non-verbal communication.

In sum, participants' emphasis upon financial, intellectual, and social capital as explanations for how viewers' lives will improve over time is problematic. Moreover, it was particularly interesting that nearly all participants made middle class or higher assumptions about viewers, considering that some participants did not self-identify as middle class. When participants spoke from their home offices filled to the brim with books, college dorm rooms, nicely decorated bedrooms, or dressed in brand-name apparel or large diamond earrings, they showed viewers that being an LGBTQ adult means having those luxuries. I now turn to describing how gender was communicated in the IGBP videos.

Gender in the IGBP Videos

As with race and class, when participants discussed gender in their videos, it was done in one of two ways: 1) referencing their own gender identities; or 2) referencing viewers or others' gender identities. More pointedly, participants' gender-based verbiage was typically comprised of statements pertaining to: 1) their childhood or current experiences as adults; or 2) gendered or non-gendered language about others, including references to "community," some variation of the LGBTQ acronym, transgender individuals, or a presumed gender binary. On several occasions, participants' discussions of gender and sexuality were intimately intertwined, and oftentimes sex and gender were conflated.

It was common for participants to talk about gender when reflecting upon their childhood experiences with harassment and bullying to empathize with viewers. For

some, the bullying they experienced began in elementary school and was either

explicitly or implicitly tied to their presumed sexual orientation and gender expression,

whereas for others, their victimization took place in middle school, high school, or later.

On closer inspection, gender-based bullying was broken down further into two

subsections: verbal abuse and physical abuse. Participants' experiences of gender-

based harassment were most commonly associated with girls exhibiting what their peers

or adults deemed to be masculine behaviors or boys exhibiting feminine behaviors. Each

type of verbal harassment is examined separately based on the perpetrator, beginning

with participants who were victims of adults' verbal harassment.

In recounting her grade school days, Deb explained how her predisposition to

play sports and engage in other "unladylike" activities was cause for concern:

> I was this total tomboy in grade school. They didn't have terms like butch or dyke then - at least not that I knew about. I always played with the boys. I excelled in sports. I didn't really get harassed by the kids in school, but I had this 5th grade teacher who called my parents in for a special conference. She felt that they should be concerned that I wasn't more ladylike and wasn't interested in more girl type activities. My mom told her to back off and leave me alone in no uncertain terms, which I thought was pretty cool. (songbyrd5, 2010)

Akin to the sexist treatment Deb received from her fifth grade teacher, Kaali was

also subjected to verbal harassment from an athletic coach simply because of her sex:

> I was the first female to play on boy's basketball team in middle school, and that was a difficult task. It was difficult because at that time, girls didn't play on boys' basketball teams. And although I was better than most of the guys that I played with, my coach still wouldn't play me. So it was a lot of adversity that I had to deal with, that I had to go through from the taunting, from the dehumanizing, from the coach because I was a girl and not wanting a girl on a boys' team. (kynshaune, 2010)

As opposed to feeling a teacher or coach's sexist wrath, Jill became the target of

her high school teachers' and administrators' malevolence for candidly speaking her

mind. Her "outspoken" behavior was equated with homosexuality:

> When I was in high school - I went to a private Christian high school - and every day I was bullied by my classmates, mostly I think because I was very outspoken and opinionated, which is not a trait that most Christian faiths like to instill in young women, but here I am. I was called a dyke a lot, and I was questioned often by the administration and teachers and my peers at school about whether or not I was homosexual. And the reason I was questioned about that was because if I actually admitted to feeling that way - which I did feel that way - I would have been kicked out of school because that is the code of ethics at that school. It's in the code of conduct. I would have been kicked out for being gay, and unfortunately that is still the truth today in 2010. (PortlandPhoenix, 2010)

The verbal harassment Joe was subjected to occurred in church and beyond, and

he attested to being on the receiving end of sexist and homophobic vitriol from his

mother and other parishioners alike. Although he does not specifically name all of his

bullies in the video, it is clear that adults and peers alike harassed Joe, and the very

names that he was called are intimately tied to gender:

> I used to go to church. I wasn't really religious, but I used to go with my family to support them, and I remember when my mom and people were always saying "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," and I'm like, that's a bunch of shit. You can't force what you believe on somebody else, especially not in this country. But I really do like how in this country and in these times that people feel that separation of church and state doesn't exist anymore. It does. IT DOES! And you don't have a right to force your religious beliefs on anybody else. I am not judging or saying anything about somebody who's Islamic. If they are talking about Islam to you, you'd be like, "I don't want to hear that." That's not right in either way. Don't do that to anybody. But I have been there, man; I know what it's like. I've been on the receiving end of being called a faggot, a sissy, a homo. One of the craziest ones that I was called was a disgrace to all men all over the planet. (exeggutor35, 2012)

Deb and Kaali's gender-based harassment did not have explicit ties to sexuality,

whereas Jill and Joe's most certainly did. Perhaps it is a function of age and gender,

such that adolescent girls in elementary and middle school who are less gender

conforming and "play with boys" are not looked upon as negatively as boys who do the reverse, and often boys' behavior is automatically tied to homosexuality (Blakemore, 2003; Carver et al, 2003; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; McCreary, 1994; Zucker, Bradley, & Sanikhani, 1997). However, as girls enter puberty, become sexualized, and are met with societal expectations around dating members of the opposite sex, any "unladylike" behavior is questioned, perceived as a threat to male courtship, and by default, automatically tied to lesbianism. Of particular note, participants who disclosed being subjected to *adults'* gender-based harassment were almost exclusively female. However, it was exclusively male participants who recalled being subjected to *peers'* gender-based verbal harassment, and in Gregory's case, that harassment lasted quite a while.

Like Deb and Kaali, Gregory almost exclusively played with members of the opposite sex during his childhood, though in doing so he became a target for his peers' sexist and homophobic vitriol:

> I think I always knew I was different from other boys even at a young age. I didn't fit in with the boys; I was always either playing with girls or with my brother. So I don't think it really clicked when I was younger; I didn't have the vocabulary to explain it, but when I started to get more into middle school like 7th, 8th grade and I just realized that I think this is what I am. And I think the first time actually I was like, "Oh, I must be gay," is when I was in 8th grade, and I was swinging on some swings with of course a bunch of girls, and one of my classmates came up to me and he's like, "All you ever do is play with the girls. You're such a fag." (SimmonsItGetsBetter, 2012)

Their peers called Jill and Kristin "dyke," and Gregory was also the recipient of peers' hate-fueled rhetoric in which gender and sexuality were inseparable. Similarly, his male peers also labeled Dennis a "fag":

> I remember being in 8th grade in a Catholic school. We were in the church practicing for a liturgical service that we were going to have that week, and I was

sitting with one of my friends there at the time, just watching the other people practice for the liturgical service. I remember some more popular boys up on the front of the church that were standing there, and I saw them whispering and pointing to us and kind of laughing and snickering behind their hands. Later, they came to us after the practice was over and called us gay and called us fags and started to make fun of us, and I had no idea what I even did or what we even did to be called that. (Cornell, 2012)

Male peers verbally accosted Gregory and Dennis for what they deemed explicitly feminine behavior and equated that feminine behavior with a presumed homosexuality. The bullies inextricably linked gender and sexual identity together without giving either Gregory or Dennis a chance to sort through those identities separately. At roughly the same age, Deb and Kaali's behavior was not associated with homosexuality, rendering their male counterparts more susceptible to sexist and homophobic vitriol precisely because of their sex.

While some experienced verbal harassment alone, others were forced to endure peers' verbal *and* physical harassment. Notably, all participants who shared their experiences of physical abuse were male, and each was challenged to prove their manhood through physical feats like fighting. Lauren was subjected to the threat of physical harassment but did not indicate that the threat manifested:

In high school, OK, maybe I was lucky. I didn't figure out my sexual orientation really until I got to college, but it doesn't mean that I escaped people calling me out and calling me dyke and threatening to beat me up and hurt me and purposely trying to make me feel like I'm less of a person. And you know what? Sometimes they succeeded, and I had crappy days or crappy weeks where I felt like, fuck it, you know what? Obviously I don't matter; obviously I don't; nothing counts. I'm miserable. And I'm here to tell you don't listen to that voice; don't give up; you can do this. (Leahashra, 2010)

Others' childhood experiences entailed peers' explicitly labeling them as "fag(got)" and subjecting them to physical assaults. David's extensive victimization lasted through most of his K-12 education, with long-term ramifications:

I remember when I was in grade school and high school being called fag, being beat up, being threatened, being insulted, having all kinds of crap written about me in graffiti around the school, being talked about, being shunned. Yeah, being the class fag. It was grim; I cried a lot; I felt scared, and it's stuff that it has taken me a while to deal with, but life gets better. (Bauer, 2010)

Kevin was also forced to physically pit himself against bullies at different stages of his childhood, though his bullies were of both sexes. In the first instance, he described the complexity of getting verbally and physically abused by a female classmate and how his upbringing limited the ways in which he could retaliate:

Everything from third grade, I remember a girl named Louise who pushed me down the block by our elementary school in third grade, just taunting me the whole time. And I was not only living with the ugliness of her calling me out by name and dealing with the gay stuff, but also dealing with the fact that it was a girl and I couldn't do anything. The way my mother raised me, I just had to take it, I thought. And I remember taking it until we got to the corner, and she was attempting to push me into traffic, at which time I popped her in the mouth. And I just had to take it for hitting a girl, but I wasn't going to let that girl take my life. (Taylor, 2010)

Later on, the verbal and physical harassment took a different form as Kevin was attacked by male peers for his gender nonconformity and therefore presumed homosexuality:

I remember a group of five boys chasing me one day in my neighborhood and throwing bottles at me and screaming faggot and all of this stuff. And I wasn't much of a runner because I was asthmatic and fat, but I ran fast enough to save my life. And what was really interesting was that of the five boys, all of them hit on me at some point. And I'm not talking about later in life; I mean in the coming weeks. I was a short, round boy whose nose was the same when I was growing up and who's behind, even though I was much shorter, was really always kind of bubbly and people thought, "Oh I know how boys get fat butts!" So it was interesting to be taunted by boys with their friends who then all wanted to do me the pleasure of servicing me and being my first. (Taylor, 2010)

Kevin's extensive experiences of verbal and physical harassment continued when he was once again challenged to physically prove his manhood:

I remember the same boy taunting me seventh, eighth, and ninth grade in junior high school and having to prove to him that I could fight every year. And that was the only reason I have ever gone to the principal's office, and each time he got in trouble and each time I had to deal with the fact that I had to defend myself even though it was exhausting. (Taylor, 2010)

While David, Lee, and Kevin's verbal and physical victimization centered on their presumed homosexuality, which ran counter to what Butler (1990) called "masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality," their sexual orientation was intimately tied to what their bullies deemed feminine. The implication is that feminine behaviors are the exact opposite of masculine behaviors, effectively placing feminine and masculine on opposite ends of a presumed gender binary. The ultimate "feminine" behavior that a person can engage in is to be the receiver of a male phallus during a sexual encounter. The use of faggot as a homophobic slur, therefore, is rooted in "phallogocentrism" (Butler, 1990) and sexuality, but the connotation is both gender and sexuality-based such that the term is so offensive to males because it presumes that they are inherently feminine, weak, and sexually receptive. As Butler (1990) asserted,

> The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female."

Whether through verbal harassment alone, or a combination of verbal and physical harassment, the most frequently tabulated name that male participants were labeled was "faggot," as several articulated in the passages above.

Correspondingly, female participants also expressed being subjected to peers' gender-based name-calling but with less frequency than males. For women, their harassers' acerbic word of choice was "dyke," and although Deb was not called "butch" or a "dyke," she insinuated if her peers/teachers had had those words in their

vocabularies they most certainly would have used them to describe her. As with faggot,

dyke is also rooted in the social construction of sexuality (Kimmel, 2001; Seidman,

2010), but the connotation behind the word is both gender and sexuality-based such that

the term is deemed offensive to women because, under the pretenses of a gender

binary, it presumes that they are inherently masculine. Because masculinity is commonly

associated with strength, virility, and sexual penetration, when applied to women these

traits make them undesirable to males. Rather than viewing gender as a performance

(Butler, 1990), the connotation behind faggot and dyke is that the person to whom these

labels are applied behaves in direct opposition to their biological anatomy, which is

therefore wrong and worthy of bullies' sexist and homophobic name-calling. In effect,

bullies discount the idea of gender as socially constructed, as Berger and Luckmann

(1966) first articulated: "Human sexuality is socially controlled by its institutionalization,"

and all institutions appear in the same way as sexuality: "given, unalterable, and self-

evident."

Comparatively, the brunt of Andie and Sarah's harassment came from within,

after they had internalized the sexism and homophobia from their environments. As

Andie explained:

> So, a lot of my bullying came from myself. It came from the ideas that the society
> that I was around had already instilled in me, but a lot of it came from myself. And
> it was more me coming to accept who I am, and it has gotten so much better ever
> since I admitted to myself who I really am and who I want to be. (andy1535353,
> 2011)

Sarah learned to stop internalizing others' sexism and homophobia after taking part in a

foreign exchange program through her college, which brought her to South Africa where

she met a sage lesbian pastor who literally altered her viewpoint:

I felt like I was breathing life for the first time. It was the beginning of my befriending my sexuality. I had internalized so many of the reproachful comments regarding homosexuality and thus regarding myself. It was the beginning of releasing the tormenting power my sexuality had had over me. It was life. (Tupper, 2011)

Other participants insinuated they too had internalized sexist and homophobic rhetoric, but only Andie and Sarah concluded that the bullying they faced largely came from within. In both instances, gender and sexual identity were again intertwined, and within their sentiment it became apparent that many of Andie and Sarah's struggles resulted from confusion about their same-sex attractions and lack of social network with which they could explore those feelings. Both women eventually found confidants who were instrumental in helping them come to terms with their lesbianism. Often this process of self-acceptance took quite some time and before reaching that point, some explicitly rejected their same-sex attraction in an attempt to prove to themselves that they were indeed a heterosexual woman or man. As Andie recalled:

So, I spent a lot of years struggling. Since seventh grade to eleventh, I struggled with the idea that I was gay, and I pushed it out of my mind for a long time. I dated a guy, and it was OK, but I didn't ever really want to kiss him. I didn't want to do things with him, and we broke up, and it was a really messy break up over a lot of stuff. And I spent the next year just trying to get back into who I really was and trying to understand myself better. And then I met my best friends, Crystal and Chelsea and Melissa, and they're the best people I could ever hope for. They helped me to accept who I am. I spent that year figuring out again that I was most definitely gay because I had a huge crush on one of my best friends, Chelsea – huge. (andy1535353, 2011)

Dennis' response to peers' verbal harassment and the combined internal and external pressures was to prove his heterosexuality and masculinity through marrying a woman and fathering children:

So what my little brain did was turn all of those feelings I had - and I did have some feelings towards my male classmates and some of my female classmates - but I turned those feelings towards my male classmates off, pushed them way in

the back of my head, and repressed those feelings. There was probably even some subconscious suppression, and for many, many years my best friend was named denial: denying who I really was. Over the years, I married the most wonderful woman in the entire world. I have 2 beautiful, adorable children, and I wouldn't take any of that back and change any of that. I'm no longer married, and now I'm in a partnered relationship with a male, and I'm happy with that. (Cornell, 2012)

Gregory made no mention of seeking help from female peers to alter his same-sex attractions, but like others his struggle was also quite extensive:

I think the first time actually I was like, "Oh I must be gay" is when I was in eighth grade. And I was swinging on some swings with of course a bunch of girls, and one of my classmates came up to me and he's like, "All you ever do is play with the girls. You're such a fag." I didn't even say anything; I didn't know what to say. I will just let that settle in, and I was like I guess that is what I am, and people don't like that. I already kind of felt alone enough as it was, and I felt like there weren't people I could connect with, and I felt really isolated. So, I just started to get kind of scared, and I didn't want to spend anymore time feeling isolated and alone, and people weren't accepting of being gay. I'm from a rural town. And there wasn't anything for me to connect with on that level, and so I just started spiraling into a really bad depression. And I think it was just feeling hopeless and just wanting to just feel like I belong somewhere, and for a long time I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. I would just wake up in the mornings sometimes, and I would just sometimes wish that maybe I didn't wake up, and maybe it would be easier if I just wasn't around anymore because then I wouldn't have to feel this intense loneliness. And I felt hopeless in that this is going to be me for the rest of my life; this is who I am, and people don't like who I am. What does that mean? (SimmonsItGetsBetter, 2012)

Deb, Sarah, and Gregory expressed a collective uneasiness in merely having same-sex attractions because they had been taught that it was wrong. Once again gender and sexuality were conjoined in participants' verbiage because being gay meant going against myriad long-standing gender norms, one of which was dating members of the opposite sex.

In conjunction with coming to terms with her sexuality, Andie also struggled with her gender expression. Andie's arduous process of coming to terms with both her

gender and sexual identities was closely related to themes she wove throughout the

video. In the excerpts below, she describes her view on gender roles:

> I tried to be girly for my mom, and I realized that's not who I want to be. I want to wear jeans, and I want to be able to wear skirts when I want to, but I want to wear jeans, and I want to be the protector. And I don't want to have to work at home and take care of children and do laundry all day and clean because that's not me; that's not who I am; I can't. I'm not that person. I want to be able to be there and be strong for my significant other. And I want to wear moto vests and dress like a guy occasionally and have people call me sir and open the door for ladies because that's the proper thing to do. (andy1535353, 2011)

Later in the video, Andie asserted her intentions of bucking gender norms in the future:

> And just let myself act how I want to act and be the gentleman and be the protector and be the one who brings home the bacon or stuff like that. Such stupid gender norms, but just be and exist and love. (andy1535353, 2011)

Like Andie, Kaali bucked traditional gender norms through her apparel. In her

video, Kaali explicated how her wardrobe, which could be construed as traditionally

masculine, did not negate the fact that she is a woman. When uttering this sentiment,

Kaali removed her baseball cap when stating, "yes, I'm a female" in an attempt to

visually prove her sex to viewers:

> As I stated, I'm 39, I wear men's ties, dress shirts – and yes, I'm a female, but I'm a happily married female with a 9-year-old daughter who loves me unconditionally just as much as I love her. (kynshaune, 2010)

While related constructs, to Andie and Kaali their self-identification as lesbian and choice

of wearing men's clothing were not synonymous. Instead of eschewing their gender as

females and identifying as genderqueer, masculine, transgender, etc., Andie and Kaali

tried to redefine what it means to be female by stretching what is acceptable underneath

the mythical feminine umbrella. For Andie that consisted of apparel choices but also role

reversals: She wanted to provide for her family, which traditionally has been men's role

in the heteronormative family unit. For Kaali, she attempted to redefine femininity

through dress while also combatting the notion that her appearance would somehow prevent her from securing a partner and having a family.

On the whole, most did not explicitly mention if and/or how they challenged traditional gender norms, but for some this became clear on closer inspection of how participants referred to themselves. For instance, in the opening lines of her video, Deb identified herself a former professional actor and businesswoman, along with her current hobby of blogging on the domain msqueer.com. The titles are representative of different gender identities, such that she avoided using the expressly female-centric term actress and male-centric term businessman and stated the opposite. Moreover, the inclusion of Ms. in her domain name is indicative of the importance of her gender as a self-identifier. All three titles illustrated the influence of gender in her word choice, which when considered alongside her video's overall focus on women is assumed to have been deliberate.

Others made note of their gender through their use of the words woman/man/ genderqueer, female/male, wife/husband, or lesbian/gay to describe themselves or their partners. Thomas identified himself as a "32-year-old openly gay man" (Tproa, 2010); Kaali identified herself as a "same-gender loving individual" (kynshaune, 2010); and Kristin identified as a lesbian who has "been with the same woman since 1998" (Rivers, 2010). Gender also surfaced in participants' descriptions of their significant others: they used the terms male, woman, or guy when discussing their partner/spouse.

There was a noticeable blurring of gender lines in the sexuality-based rhetoric that self-identified women and genderqueer individuals used to describe themselves that was absent in men's videos. Lauren identified as both lesbian and genderqueer and later as

gay when mentioning her blog "Just Another Gay in the Life." Lauren used lesbian and gay interchangeably, a practice that was replicated by others as well, yet no men ever identified themselves as anything other than gay or queer (i.e., never as lesbians). Abbie, Andie, Lauren, Sam, and Sarah were among the younger participants in the sample, and their interchangeable word choice could be indicative of their age and the fact the some women and genderqueer folks use gay broadly, without any intentional gender claims attached. Others either explicitly referred to themselves as lesbian or did not use sexual identifiers.

Participants used gendered language in various capacities. All of Joe's references to bullies were predicated on the assumption that they were male ("niggers;" "motherfuckers") despite mentioning being subjected to his mother's homophobic rhetoric. Similarly, when describing how a childhood bully recently apologized for tormenting him in elementary school, Lee referred to a quote he encountered from Kahlil Gibran, which stated, "If the other person injures you, you may forget the injury, but if you injure him, you will always remember" (Wind, 2010). The quote employs male-centric language in stating "him." While Lee applied the quote to his situation (as a male) having been bullied by another male, this reference was representative of just one of a few male-centric references made within each of his video's subsections, and he projected an exclusively male-centric focus throughout the video.

Both Kevin and Kile used the phrase "you guys" when speaking to viewers collectively. "You guys" is representative of a dialectical difference of the informal pluralization of you and is often used by individuals when speaking about both men and women. Yet, the word "guys" is gendered and explicitly refers to men, which has led

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some scholars to render the phrase sexist (Maynor, 2000). Unequivocally, Kile and Kevin's usage of "you guys" could be viewed as nothing more than a geographical colloquialism, since "you guys" is commonly used both on the West Coast and in the Northeast where they reside, respectively. But when the totality of their video content is considered, both men overwhelmingly used rhetoric implying their audiences were comprised almost exclusively of male viewers. Within Kevin's video specifically, there were several indications that he was targeting a male audience:

> It gets better when you tell somebody you like them, and he tells you he liked you first. It gets better when the high, squeaky voice you have now becomes a baritone, and the muscles you don't think will ever come show up hard and strong, and when you find out that your light way and your walk becomes a dance, and your way with words becomes a poem or song or best-selling novel. (Taylor, 2010)

Kevin was not alone in assuming his audience was of the same sex or in using language focused almost exclusively on the same sex. Within the course of Deb's video, nearly every other person she referenced was female – her fifth grade teacher, mother, lesbian celebrities, summer camp attendees, authors, and spiritual mentor – with the exception of having to awkwardly kiss her male co-star in a school play.

In stark contrast to the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler, 1990) responsible for the gendered language prevalent within the aforementioned videos was the non-gendered language others used to varying degrees within their videos. Kaali referred to herself as a "same-gender loving individual" but also referred to kids with "two moms or two dads or one mom or one dad who is a member of the same gender loving community" (kynshaune, 2010). She briefly used the typically gender-laden terms gay (male) and lesbian (female) as clarification to viewers unfamiliar with the phrase same gender loving, but she preferred to use non-gendered, inclusive verbiage in her video.

Kristin and Lauren also used non-gendered language. Kristin declared, "I wanted to make this video to express to anyone struggling with the prejudice and discrimination of being who you are, to know that it gets better" (Rivers, 2010). She opened her video to all rather than singling out viewers based on their gender and/or sexual identities. Kaali, Kristin, and Lauren's videos did include gender pronouns throughout but were more inclusive of all gender identities through their messaging than were others. Comparatively, Kim's video was perhaps the most inclusive of all. Kim, who identified as genderqueer, did not use gender pronouns at any point to self-identify or to insinuate viewers' gender identities.

It is unclear whether participants' decisions to use gendered or non-gendered language or to make broader viewership assumptions were conscious decisions. Perhaps the male-centric verbiage in Lee, Kevin, and Kile's videos was a result of only boys'/men's suicides receiving mainstream media coverage at the time of their video recording. Perhaps Deb, Kaali, Kristin, Lauren, and Kim's female-centric language or non-gendered language represented a way in which the self-identified lesbians could combat sexism. Moreover, it could also be as simple as men, women, and genderqueer individuals thinking and speaking through their own gendered experiences.

Gender also tended to surface in the videos under the guise of being one part of the presumed broader LGBTQ community through general references to "community," some variation of the LGBTQ acronym, or explicit references to transgender individuals. As Dennis asserted, he is "an out and proud member of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community" (Cornell, 2012); Sam urged viewers not to take their own lives because "The LGBT Community needs you to continue its fight for equality" (SamMal13,

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2012); and Thomas ensured viewers they could find a place to live "no matter which letter of the LGBTQA you fit into" (Tproa, 2010). The implication within all community mentions is that individuals of varying sexual *and* gender identities are inherently linked together as oppressed segments of the population. Within the rhetoric of these six videos, transgender individuals are viewed as part of the whole rather than treating gender (i.e., transgender) as a separate issue from sexuality (i.e., lesbian, gay, or bisexual). For the vast majority of participants, however, there was no explicit linkage of LGB and T individuals.

Participants offered additional gendered insights through acronym usage, specifically concerning inclusivity and order of importance. In total, five participants used some version of an acronym to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people collectively: GLBT, LGBT, or LGBTQA. It is telling that all five participants included transgender in their acronyms, and the order of importance within the acronyms used reveals that women (lesbians) were often placed first. It was more common for participants to give precedence to women by listing "L" first. The LGBT ordering is much more pervasive within the LGBT movements, for-profit and non-profit organizations, and academic institutions, as a quick Google search of LGBT returned more than four times the results of GLBT.

In conjunction with inclusive acronym usage, nearly half the participants explicitly referred to transgender individuals in their videos. David assured viewers struggling with their sexual and/or gender identities and their religious beliefs that they are loved:

> Know that you're lovable and wonderful, and you may have other stuff in your life to work on, but your being queer, your being gay, your being trans - any of that, that's not anything that needs to be fixed. (Bauer, 2010)

Likewise, Deb proclaimed, "Bottom line: I'm OK; you're OK; and we are OK, gay. Or bi or trans or however you call yourself" (songbyrd5, 2010). In other instances, Dennis referred to his current Trevor Project training to "help youth work through their feelings and things about their own sexuality and gender identity" (Cornell, 2012), and Lauren drew attention to the book *The Last Time I Wore a Dress*, written by what she described as "a very happy female to male transsexual" (Leahashra, 2010).

Dennis' mention of becoming a Trevor Project volunteer was not the sole reference to the non-profit organization and IGBP benefactor, as participants' mentions of transgender folks or gender identity were often done so in the same breath as Trevor Project mentions. Some explicitly referenced transgender individuals and/or gender identity in the course of their videos while referencing the Trevor Project, whereas others' Trevor Project mentions implied gender identity because the organization identifies itself as "providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, *transgender*, and questioning youth" (www.thetrevorproject.org).

Contrasting participants' references to transgender individuals and therefore a gender identity spectrum, Abbie and Kile insinuated that a gender binary exists. In Abbie's video, she outlined for whom she will be angry:

> Anger isn't always productive, but I'm going to allow myself to be angry for you today. And I'll be angry for the men and women in loving, committed relationships with their partners. And I'll be angry for myself and for my girlfriend and for anyone else affected by this. (Abbie, 2012)

Abbie explicitly channeled her anger by focusing on coupled men and women, including her partner and herself. She added "anyone else affected by this," yet the content of her video taken in full implies a gender binary. For example, later in her video she referenced normalization and couplings once again:

You should know that there are so many of us fighting for you around the country and showing the people that think that your love for someone who has the same body parts as you somehow threatens them; showing them that we're just doing what we do, we're just being normal; we're just figuring out what works for us. And for me that's dating my awesome girlfriend, who I love, and for you that should be your own thing, and I support that. (Abbie, 2012)

Analogously, Kile spoke of what viewers have to look forward to in the context of coupling:

I don't know what you know about what's out here other than what you read in the papers, but trust me - whatever you're looking for, it's here! A husband, a wife, depending on your sex. (Ozier, 2010)

He guaranteed viewers that, "Whatever your interests are, there are groups of guys and gals who are also gay and are just waiting to be your friends" (Ozier, 2010). In both instances, Kile referenced a gender binary by not explicitly allowing for any variation beyond male/husband/guys and female/wife/gals in the context of finding a spouse or friends.

Others who opted to use gendered language implied a gender binary. Amongst the majority of participants who did not mention transgender individuals in some capacity, the implication is that they also subscribed to a gender binary through their silence. Beyond transgender and genderqueer, none referenced intersex individuals who are included in more extensive acronyms related to sexual and gender identities, and on only two occasions was "questioning" included in participants' verbiage (whereby questioning could refer to sexual identity, gender identity, or both).

Non-verbal Communication

Gender was also conveyed through non-verbal communication, specifically through how participants dressed in their videos and video backgrounds. Just as some female- and genderqueer-identified participants used gay and lesbian interchangeably

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when referring to their own or others' sexual orientation, some expressed gender fluidity through dress. It was common to see female- and genderqueer-identified individuals wearing men's clothing. However, the reverse was not true; no male-identified participants were dressed in what could be construed as traditionally feminine garments.

Kaali and Sam represent two examples of female-identified participants dressed in what is often considered to be traditionally masculine clothing. Kaali wore a men's gray T-shirt and a baseball cap, which hid her short hair. Through the removal of her baseball cap to "performatively" (Butler, 1990) demonstrate she is indeed female, Kaali indicated the importance of hair to her gender identity and that gender can be proven through physical features. Joe was dressed almost identically to Kaali, though in different colors, yet at no point did he remove his cap to prove that he is male.

Sam deliberately dressed in her Army fatigues, which have the tendency to make almost any woman look masculine due to the colors and cut of the garments, military requirements for how female hair is styled, and the military's long-standing history of being a male-dominated institution. However, when coupled with closely cropped hair and a lack of make-up, and worn by someone in a slouched, seated position, Sam's presentation skewed masculine, as did genderqueer-identified Kim and Lauren. Similar to Sam, Kim had very short hair yet accessorized with women's eyeglass frames, a thin wrist banded watch, and large pearl earrings. Kim made no reference to her own or others' gender identity/ies in the course of her short video, but the implication through her presentation was that she visually presented herself as genderqueer. Comparatively, Lauren did explicitly self-identify as genderqueer, though her medium-length, curly,

brown hair juxtaposed her masculine apparel, and gave her a more feminine appearance.

Hair was a common differentiator in the sample, particularly when participants' clothing could largely be categorized as unisex. Many were casually dressed in T-shirts or sweatshirts in their videos, but the physical features of their hair (both head and facial) were indicative of gender. For example, Dennis had a shaved head and a faint five o'clock shadow, both traditionally features associated with men; Lee also had a faint five o'clock shadow; and Gregory sported a beard. Comparatively, while Kristin's rectangular eyeglass frames could be construed as unisex, her haircut and facial structure were feminine, and the large pink streak dyed into Abbie's ponytailed hair is a color more commonly associated with women.

In other instances in which participants were dressed in clothing commonly associated as masculine or feminine, their head and facial hair served as additional indicators of gender. David and Thomas were both balding on top, with hair on the sides. In terms of facial hair, David and Rafael had salt and peppered goatees, Thomas sported a fully-grown, bright-red beard, Kevin had a thin mustache, and Jordon a five o'clock shadow. Andie was dressed in a black leather moto vest and took on a more masculine appearance, but underneath the vest she wore a short-sleeved women's cut T-shirt and complemented her apparel with a shaggy, Justin Bieber-esque haircut popular among lesbians at the time ("Lesbians who Look Like Justin Bieber," 2013). Moreover, Jill's V-neck T-shirt and three-quarter length sweater were both femininely cut articles of clothing that accentuate the collarbone, and her nails were painted and her

red hair held back in a ponytail. Sarah's short, brown hair was coupled with a women's sweater and camisole that minimally exposed her cleavage, indicative of her sex.

Female- or genderqueer-identified participants' video backgrounds contained additional contextual clues about gender. Both dressed in men's clothing, the bedrooms in which Kaali and Lauren filmed had uniquely feminine decorations. Kaali's had matching zebra-printed bedding and curtains and Lauren's boasted pastel green wall color and lacy curtains. Feminine clothing surrounded Abbie, who was seated in her dorm room, including the distinct cut of a women's racing swimsuit hanging on the wall behind her and a closet exploding with women's garments seen over her left shoulder. Proving the exception for male-identified participants, Dennis was seated on a couch situated in front of a pink and purple metallic wall hanging, the coloring and design of which is more commonly associated with feminine décor.

Lastly, music offered further insight into gender. While Deb, Joe, and Kevin all referenced female musicians in their videos, Andie was the only participant to play music in her video. While talking about her gender and sexual identity struggles throughout middle and high school, pop singer P!nk's "Fuckin' Perfect" played softly in the background. Later when Andie described reaching a point of self-acceptance, Michelle Branch's "All You Wanted" can be heard softly in the background. In her video's final ten seconds, "All You Wanted" was turned up significantly as the Trevor Project's toll free phone number and the phrase "it gets better" flashed on the screen. The manner in which the musical tracks were situated in Andie's video, specifically the volume at which they were played, when the songs started/stopped, and how she wove them together with her spoken words, were all calculated production choices. Moreover, P!nk is known

for challenging gender norms associated with female pop singers and her song, "Fuckin'

Perfect," specifically deals with the topics of depression, self-mutilation, and suicide,

leading some LGBTQ bloggers to immediately stake their claim on the song's

applicability to their audience (Crystal, 2012; Donovan, 2012).

Whether through verbal or non-verbal communication about themselves or

references to others' gender identities, overwhelmingly male-identified participants

reified the very conceptualizations of a gender binary that their bullies had previously,

with some exception (transgender inclusivity, etc.). Comparatively, female-identified

participants were less reliant upon "compulsory heterosexuality and masculinist

domination" in both their verbiage and dress. Kimmel (2001) stated, "Masculinity is

defined more by what one is not [feminine] than who one is," and he proposed, "It is the

fear that men will unmask other men, emasculate them, or reveal to the world that they

are not 'real' men." Therefore, the IGBP rhetoric, as related to gender, was rarely queer

in its execution, such that theorists' pontifications about how gender has come to be

were upheld rather than challenged (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978; Kimmel, 2001;

Seidman, 2010), and participants used gendered language to "objectify shared

experiences and make them available to all within the linguistic [IGBP] community, thus

becoming both the basis and instrument of a collective stock of knowledge." Likewise,

participants' IGBP rhetoric was rarely queer related to sexual orientation, as described

below.

Sexual Orientation in the IGBP Videos

As with the identity components previously analyzed, when participants discussed

sexual orientation in their videos, they did so either by mentioning their *own* or *others'*

sexual identities. Four broad themes emerged, each containing sub-themes of discussion, including participants': 1) lives before coming out (i.e., enduring bullying, homophobic rhetoric, etc.; initial denial of their same-sex attractions); 2) coming out processes and later self-acceptance; 3) present identities (specifically, how participants identified themselves); and 4) notions of a singular LGBTQ community. Each theme is discussed in turn below.

Given that the suicides of both bullied perceived and self-identified LGBTQ youth was the impetus for the IGBP, it was logical that many participants spoke of their own experiences of being verbally and/or physically harassed in an effort to demonstrate they intimately understood viewers' physical and mental anguish. Participants' subjection to sexist and homophobic bullying and name-calling were discussed in the previous section. To avoid repetition, this section focuses narrowly on participants' sexual orientation-based victimization.

It was common for men to report being labeled a "fag(got)" by their peers for outwardly exhibiting feminine behaviors, again demonstrating that peers' name-calling was rooted in both homophobia and sexism (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978; Kimmel, 2001; Seidman, 2010). Moreover, men reported being subjected to far more homophobic-laden name-calling than did women, the latter of whom were almost always referred to as "dykes." Peer and adult bullies hurled sexual orientation-based epithets at – and, in some cases physically assaulted – their victims from as early as elementary school all the way through adulthood. Perhaps as a function of Savage and Miller's tone-setting video, most made only passing mention of the verbal and physical harassment they endured as opposed to offering much detail about what actually transpired, with the

exception of Kevin. Both Savage and Miller focused extensively on the positive aspects

of their present, adult lives while succinctly mentioning the childhood bullying they were

subjected to because the focus of the IGBP is not to reiterate the purgatory viewers likely

are currently living (Gross, 2011).

Among participants who described being subjugated to peers' physical abuse on

account of their presumed homosexuality, experiences varied greatly. Participants who

were physically abused by their bullies were exclusively male, a function of the

intertwining of gender and sexuality whereby "homophobia is a central organizing

principle of cultural manhood" (Kimmel, 2001). Although "dyke" was hurled at women,

the fact that men reported higher instances of verbal assaults that quickly turned into

physical assaults demonstrates that the oppression behind the words "fag(got)" and

"dyke" is not equivalent.

Over half of participants shared their experiences of getting verbally and/or

physically harassed in their youth or adulthood. With the exception of Kristin's comment

about a former friend calling her a "fucking dyke" and Dennis' process of coming out later

in adulthood, participants overwhelmingly painted an image of bullying and harassment

as a temporary hardship relegated to childhood that eventually disappears once

adulthood is reached. The notion of bullying occurring only within the boundaries of K-12

schools is not only empirically incorrect (Phillips, 2012; Phoenix, 2011; Rankin et al.,

2010), but furthermore it is the core argument of many IGBP opponents who take issue

with the project's temporal premise of life getting better in the future (McEwan, 2010;

Novack, 2010). The complexity and ferocity of bullying is not limited to a certain age or

locale. Perhaps a function of victimization experiences occurring almost exclusively at

school, in conjunction with an understanding that adolescents typically spend a substantial portion of their time at school, participants' verbiage had the effect of temporally (K-12) and spatially (school) freezing viewers' victimization experiences while blaming that victimization almost exclusively on peers' behavior. However, social science researchers have proven time and again that bullying extends far beyond those artificially contrived parameters (Phillips, 2012; Phoenix, 2011; Rankin et. al, 2010), and participants' verbiage could serve to (un)intentionally discount viewers' experiences falling outside of these preconceived K-12, peer, and schoolyard parameters.

In addition to verbal and physical attacks, participants referenced the external homophobia they experienced and internalized as adolescents. Although not subjugated to peers' schoolyard harassment, in tears Andie recalled the strong influence and detrimental effects that her parents' homophobia had on her coming out process:

> I automatically took it upon myself to promise God that I wouldn't be gay because I knew that they [her parents] would disapprove of it and I knew that I would be ostracized for it. And I knew that it was something that they made me believe that was not good. It was something that I had just always had been taught that I wasn't supposed to be. (andy1535353, 2011)

Others fell prey to peers' belittlement and homophobic maliciousness as well, which triggered myriad reactions such as confusion and physical illness that manifested into internalized homophobia. Like Andie and Deb, the threat of peers' abuse was omnipresent and had long-term ramifications on Thomas' psyche, "I wasn't subjected to much, but I let the fear of that run my life until after college when I came out" (Tproa, 2010). When his eighth-grade classmates labeled him and a male friend "fags," Dennis recalled thinking "it [homosexuality] was the most horrible thing that I could be associated with" (Cornell, 2012), and before Gregory was given an opportunity to

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mentally or physically explore his sexuality a male classmate branded him a "fag," which

immediately sent him "spiraling into a really bad depression" that lasted years

(SimmonsItGetsBetter, 2012).

Deb's physical attraction to girls came at a young age, though like Gregory she

had neither the vocabulary with which to explain her feelings nor a confidant to speak to

about them. Yet, structurally, disciplinarily, hegemonically, and interpersonally it was

made abundantly clear to Deb that anything straying from a "compulsory heterosexual"

(Butler, 1990) union was not only wrong but grounds for imprisonment:

> Even though I didn't really experience bullying in school, I can remember feelings
> of confusion and being scared by thoughts of wanting to lean over and kiss the
> girls in my class. I had those as early as grade school, feelings of attraction and
> thoughts that I didn't understand, and I was really scared. I thought I was sick or
> bad or something; I didn't know. It's not like there were celebrity role models out
> there like Ellen and Rosie. There weren't any popular TV shows or movies about
> being queer. There was nobody I could talk to. So I had to keep this giant secret
> that I didn't understand and was afraid of, all to myself. All I knew was, I was
> different, and I was pretty sure my difference wasn't socially acceptable. I was
> convinced that if anyone found out the truth about me, they'd lock me up and
> never let me return. (songbyrd5, 2010)

As the only participant to declare that he was still struggling with self-acceptance

at the time of recording, Jordon acknowledged in his first video that he was in a similar

position to viewers, "Trust me: I get it; I've been through it. Even I'm still trying to figure

all of this out" (Bridges, 2010). In his second video, Jordon explained that external forces

were largely responsible for his internalized homophobia and asserted that often it is

victimized sexual minorities who add "fuel" to their bullies' proverbial homophobic fire:

> But the past 12-13 months have not gone without unwarranted doubt and a lot of
> very confusing feelings. And I had to introvert for awhile and really reflect on what
> has happened, and what is going on in my life about what is causing doubt in
> myself, and I came to the realization that yes, others, many others, will instill self
> doubt, but it's ourselves that fuel it. And so the anger, the questions, the

confusion, the hurt – and I just want you to know that you are not alone. (Bridges, 2011)

Participants' experiences with external and internal homophobia highlighted above offer a glimpse into participants' collective struggles. All participants' videos explicitly referenced either having overcome or being in the process of overcoming external and subsequently internalized homophobia, illustrating the strength of homophobia's grip on and long-lasting effects in society (Foucault, 1978). The fact that the IGBP is needed and developed by Savage and Miller is proof of homophobia's stronghold, but again that stronghold is not only felt among youth in K-12 schools nor brought on by peers alone. Rather, participants were subjected to homophobia from *multiple* outlets. Notwithstanding the fact that some participants failed to clearly attribute from whom that homophobia was learned, among the majority of those who did, structural institutions (family and religion) served as key preceptors.

As a result of the mental and physical torture brought on by external and internal homophobia, numerous participants described being in a state of denial about their homosexuality, which led to varying behaviors of suppression. In offering advice for how viewers can avoid repeating his mistakes and find solace sooner, Gregory explained the importance of talking with a trusted confidant:

You can't hold all of those feelings inside. I think that I did a lot of repressing and internalizing a lot of those really difficult emotions about myself, and it really- it put me in a terrible place. (SimmonsItGetsBetter, 2012)

Much of the external homophobia Sarah experienced came from her religious community, which caused her immense pain during her adolescence as she tried to comprehend what same-sex attraction meant in relation to her deeply-rooted Evangelical Christian faith. Sarah's fear of losing both her social and religious communities literally

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led her to attempt to "pray the gay away," a phrase popularized in discussions of

controversial ex-gay organizations, such as Exodus International, that target deeply

devoted individuals like Sarah and try to convert them into full-fledged heterosexuals but

that have been largely discounted by the American Psychological Association

("Resolution," 2009). Sarah recalled:

> In middle school, I first began thinking about girls. I really didn't mean to; I really didn't want to. I damned my homosexuality. I damned it and I damned it. I prayed for its release, and I prayed and I prayed. Maybe you understand. And yet, despite all my prayer, I am still gay. Oh, and how I was afraid. I was afraid someone would find out; I was afraid that there were no other gay Christians; I was afraid that I would always be alone. I was afraid that my friends would disapprove; I was afraid that there was no place for me within the church; I was afraid that I would be tormented forever. (Tupper, 2011)

As participants battled internalized homophobia on their paths to self-acceptance,

oftentimes they mentioned denial as a key step in that process. Although not all

participants explicitly mentioned their own stages of denial, several did, and for others it

was implied through their sentiment and the empathy expressed in their videos. What

participants neglected to do, however, was explain to viewers that among those

questioning their sexual orientation, denial is a standard part of the process directly

related to the external and internal homophobia they are presumably being subjected to

(Coleman, 1982) – and will continue to be subjected to in the future. Furthermore, while

the majority did make some reference to the length of time they battled their internalized

homophobia and denied or delayed their current identification as gay or lesbian, the

depth of these explanations varied greatly, running the gamut from David's brief

statement "it's stuff that it has taken me a while to deal with" (Bauer, 2010) to lengthy

narratives focusing almost exclusively on their own coming out processes. Therefore,

there was a sizable glossing-over effect created by participants who did not disclose

lengthiness of their own denial nor offer viewers insight into how long this period could

last. Instead, internalized homophobia and denial were often mentioned only in passing

or ignored altogether as if participants thought viewers were cognizant of these stages.

But like Gregory, many viewers may not possess the vocabulary or understanding of

what "internalized homophobia" is before watching participants' videos and could benefit

from a deeper explanation of others' paths to self-acceptance, especially the denial

stage that could last decades.

Also missing from most participants' verbiage was the reality that homophobia is

not the only phobia viewers have internalized, or will in the future, either before or after

they adopt an LGBTQ identity. While acknowledging that homosexuality or bisexuality

may be one hurdle in viewers' paths to self-acceptance, the reality that they may have to

come to terms with *other* facets of their identities for which they are also oppressed

(race, class, gender, religion, etc.) in conjunction with their sexuality was rarely

discussed (Butler, 1990; Collins, 2009). Becoming members of the mythical "LGBTQ

community" presents other unmentioned challenges, such as overcoming biphobia and

transphobia as well, which is often an additional hurdle for anyone not self-identifying as

bi or trans. Moreover, others who may be questioning their sexual or gender identities

beyond homosexuality alone are ignored altogether as discussions of internalized

homophobia were not expanded to include biphobia, transphobia, and gender phobias

(Andersen & Collins, 2007; Brooks et al., 2008; Chun, & Singh, 2010).

Half of the sample referenced their coming out process at some point in their

narratives, though the length of time dedicated to describing that process varied

considerably. For instance, Andie, Deb, and Gregory used nearly all of their time to

discuss their coming out processes, whereas Rafael and Thomas only briefly touched on when they came out (after college), referencing it almost in passing. The duration of others' coming out discussions fell somewhere in between the two extremes, if mentioned at all. Although Andie presented her narrative as if her coming out process took place entirely in the past, the tears she wept throughout demonstrated she was still experiencing the pain of that struggle. Like Joe and Jordon, Andie vlogged (i.e., video blogged) for what appeared to be an additional step in her own coming out process: confirmation of her identity. Likewise, as Jill relayed her story of life vastly improving since high school and smiling concurrently throughout filming to reiterate her happiness, it appeared as if some participants were using the IGBP as a way to reinforce to *themselves* that "it gets better."

On the other end of the spectrum, Gregory's coming out process was precipitated by a peer's homophobic epithet on the middle school playground, which later contributed to his suicidal ideation. After seeking maternal guidance, Gregory started seeing a therapist during those turbulent years and eventually reached the point of coming out:

> And I started seeing a therapist, and I thought that that was excellent – to just have that person to talk to about things. And I didn't even come out to my therapist right away; I was scared. I couldn't say it aloud yet, but I think that after being with Joyce, my therapist, all through high school, she really helped me work through some feelings. I finally did come out to her, and we were able to talk about it, and it felt really good. But I think when my life really started to change, and when I felt like I belonged was when I went to UVM [the University of Vermont]. I graduated from high school, and I think for the first time in my life I felt like there were people there that wanted to get to know me. They wanted to have me come sit with them at the table at a dining hall. I never had that before: someone wanting to come sit with you and wanting to get to know you and learn about you and I guess celebrate who I was, not feel like it was this horrible thing that I couldn't be myself. And I think the people I made friends with, they just accepted me for who I was and loved me for who I was, and I think that's when I really started to become myself and accept my true self. (SimmonsItGetsBetter, 2012)

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Others' coming out processes comprised merely one small section of their videos and featured expressions of gratitude or ingratitude to others involved in the process. Case in point, Jill and Lauren thanked their friends and family for helping them through the coming out process; Sam revealed that her family contributed to her turmoil; and Lauren relied on social networks to navigate through the arduous process:

> I am a lesbian. I identify as genderqueer, and I have been out for six or seven years, and I'm really glad that I listened to the wonderful parents I have and the wonderful friends who stuck by my side through all of it - and the friends that I have made throughout the years. I'm really glad that I'm here to say that it does get better. (Leahashra, 2010)

Contrasting Lauren's experience, the homophobic vitriol Sam faced when coming out was in part from her own family:

> When I came out, I, just like many other gay people, got discriminated against - sometimes by my family who didn't understand; sometimes by other kids at school or on the bus; and sometimes even by complete strangers. Back then I remember how much anger and hatred I had for those who told me I was living a life that was wrong, and that I was unaccepted by society. (SamMal13, 2012)

Others spoke of their coming out experiences only briefly. In flipping between first and second person verb tenses, Kevin stated that he was different than his peers, both before and after he came out, a trait he predicted would be endemic to his viewers as well. In doing so, he dispelled the media myth that all gay men are partiers/clubbers perpetuated by shows featuring almost exclusively White ("Queer as Folk;" "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy;" "Will & Grace") or Black ("Noah's Arc") casts:

> I was different even once I came out. Even once you came out and you just weren't the club kid, you were still smarter and didn't drink, didn't want to go to all the parties. There's still more yous who show up at the library, who go to the museums, who do different things. (Taylor, 2010)

In the mere three sentences that Kaali included about coming out, much remained

unspoken about *what* generational and what societal differences existed, for whom,

where, when, why, and how:

> When I was younger, we couldn't be gay; it was difficult. And now that I'm older, the world has begun to evolve, and there's a lot more support than there was when I was your age or when I was a teenager. It's easier to come out than it was then. (kynshaune, 2010)

Beyond the passage of time and societal shifts in opinions about homosexuality, Kaali

was referencing challenges she experienced related to her own coming out process,

which may have touched on her racial, class, and gender identities. However, by not

expanding upon what she meant by the phrase "we couldn't be gay," Kaali missed an

opportunity to: 1) virtually console LGBTQ youth who are in a similar position as she was

in; and 2) educate those who face(d) different challenges outside of her own and/or do

not have a conceptual understanding of intersecting identities. Instead, it is plausible that

Kaali's rhetoric could seem patronizing to viewers of all ages because she asserted that,

by default, her experience was harder than theirs without detailing how or why.

Whether participants made passing reference to their own coming out processes

or went into explicit detail, nearly all came from the vantage point of assuming their

viewers are LGBTQ-identified *and* already are or soon will be going through the coming

out process. With the exception of Dennis, all participants further assumed that this

process would be undergone exclusively by youth as opposed to acknowledging that for

many, the coming out process can last decades and extend into the latter stages of life

(Cass, 1984; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Moreover, only two

participants (Deb and Thomas) explicitly recognized that individuals questioning their

sexual orientation are likely also watching the videos, though Deb labeled them as

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"questioning youth." By doing so, participants limited the efficacy of their coming out narratives by placing age-based parameters around their target audience. In conjunction with this exclusivity, at times participants' word choices or tonality pertaining to coming out overshadowed their presumed intentions. For instance, while Kaali may not have intended to trivialize viewers' coming out experiences or patronize them in the process, both are potential byproducts of her phrasing. Similarly, by alternating between first and second person verb tenses, Kevin projected his own behaviors onto viewers, which may not hold true for them. In both instances, viewers could be turned off by participants' verbiage because of their underlying assumptions.

By sharing their past and present coming out experiences with viewers, participants provided insight into the coming out process, such as whom or what viewers could possibly rely on for help (family, friends, therapists, and/or the media), but also cautioning them against the notion that everyone in their social networks will be receptive to their needs – a reality bullied individuals likely already know. Participants failed to emphasize adequately that each individual's coming out process will vary tremendously based on whom they can rely on or what resources viewers are physically and mentally able/ready to consult (Cass, 1984; Cornell, 2012; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Lacking in most participants' videos was the acknowledgement that coming out is indeed a process. Though implied by Andie, Deb, and Gregory's lengthy narratives and Dennis' statement "it has taken me a long time to get here" (Cornell, 2012), for viewers struggling with their sexuality it would be beneficial to be informed explicitly that: 1) coming out is a lengthy process taking on many forms; and 2) before one comes out to

others they must first come out to themselves, which are separate, distinct stages (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Among participants in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, overwhelmingly the image presented was one of having completed the coming out process and no longer having to face bullies or any semblance of internalized homophobia, which the interviews showed was largely untrue, even among those living in gay meccas like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City. It is important for viewers of all ages to be made aware of the length and breadth of the coming out process so that they are adequately prepared for it, whether they come out themselves or are a part of another's coming out process.

Some explained how they denied their initial same-sex attractions or behaviors, which Cass (1984) labeled "identity confusion," while others shared how they survived their sexuality-centric hardships and achieved self-acceptance. Labeling himself as "living proof" that life gets better, Joe described arriving at the an essentialist conceptualization of sexuality whereby "sexuality is a basic and essential part of being human" (Seidman, 2010):

> I've been to hell and back when it comes to the thought of suicide because I have been there. I contemplated suicide years ago when I was a teenager because people were just making my life pure hell, about something that I had no control over. I was born that way; I had been born that way; there's no other way around it. (exeggutor35, 2012)

The vast majority of Joe's video was spent simultaneously trying to exact retribution on his bullies from behind a phone screen and enlightening viewers that religious-based homophobia is unwarranted and fundamentally wrong. But interwoven within his caustic rhetoric were indications that Joe was still on the path to reaching a point of self-acceptance. As he attempted to convince viewers that their lives are worth living, he did

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so from the position of reassuring himself of that argument and wanting to provide hope for others in similar situations.

Like Joe, Sam arrived at an essentialist understanding of sexuality out of necessity:

> As I grew up, I realized that for me, I didn't have a choice in the matter. Being a lesbian is who I was, and I needed to come to terms with that so that I had an easier life. (SamMal13, 2012)

For many participants, concluding that their sexual orientation was not a choice/socially constructed was a key turning point in their path to self-acceptance. Because socially conservative individuals and groups who seek to withhold political equality from LGBTQ individuals (disciplinary domain) often use rhetoric based on the idea of sexuality as a choice ("Homosexuality and Choice," 2012) and biologists are still seeking evidence for both sides of the "gay gene" debate (Abrams, 2007; Koebler, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2012), it was important for participants to explain their positionality on "choice" in an effort to combat the hegemonic rhetoric and competing information viewers are likely receiving externally from numerous structural institutions (media, religious institutions, political institutions, etc.).

Related to their own experiences in overpowering hegemonic, homophobic rhetoric, participants explained overcoming fears about how others would treat them on account of their lesbianism. After getting verbally harassed by school administrators and teachers in high school, Jill feared that she could never "be open about who she was and be successful and happy and loved and accepted" (PortlandPhoenix, 2010). In the next breath, Jill gleefully shared that both she and her fiancée were all of the above and more, having found community through family, friends, co-workers, and their religious

institution. Jill did not articulate whether her own self-acceptance or others' acceptance of her sexual orientation came first, but rather presented the information as if it was a reciprocal process.

In sum, viewers were presented with several different examples of how participants survived the initial stages of their coming out processes and eventually reached a point of self-acceptance. Underlying this sentiment was the notion that viewers could also reach a point of self-acceptance through: 1) realizing that sexuality is biologically determined at birth and therefore not a choice; and 2) the assistance of some friends, family members, therapists, and religiously affiliated individuals. Physical and social scientists continue to conduct studies on the question of "choice" (Abrams, 2007; Koebler, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2012) as politicians, celebrities, and everyday folk continue to debate it (Broverman, 2012; Malory, 2012; Witchel, 2012), but it is far easier to convince at-risk, suicidal youth that the attribute for which they are being bullied or harassed – sexuality – is ingrained in their DNA and not an active choice they are making. If sexuality is socially constructed and therefore an active choice, then suicidal youth could be blamed for their own victimization. It remains to be seen whether the multi-faceted, politically laden "choice" question can ever be answered in full. But when participants asserted that sexuality is not a choice, they closed off the possibility that for some, choice may indeed play a role in their present or future sexual identity codification. Moreover, for the most part participants only applied the biological determinism argument to gay and lesbian individuals (and on one occasion, transgender individuals), thereby serving to exclude bisexual individuals and in turn asserting that sexual identity is something that is fixed and does not or cannot change over time.

Rather than repeating an oft-heard fallacy about bisexuals' inability to choose a mate of either the same-sex or opposite sex, participants shut down the possibility that for some who adopt gay or lesbian identities, sexuality is fluid, and at some point in their lives they may actively choose partners of the opposite sex and/or no longer identify as gay/lesbian (Diamond, 2009).

As mentioned previously in discussions of coming out, it was common for participants to name their family, friends, and/or religious figures among those who had helped them on their path to self-acceptance. The turbulence of that path was often stated outright, but participants provided little information about the depth and breadth of the self-acceptance process and further made the assumption that if participants' family, friends, and/or religious figures had helped them, then certainly viewers' would as well. For suicidal LGBTQ or questioning youth, however, it is more likely that either they cannot actively seek guidance from their family members, peers, or religious institutions, or they may not yet be aware of who within those groups is approachable and will be receptive in their time of need (Hass et al., 2011). Participants' overall sexual orientation-based sentiment was often predicated on the belief that if they did it, then participants could follow in their footsteps. Because of racial, class, gender, and sexual orientation differences, among a plethora of others (geography, religion, political orientation, etc.), a one-size-fits-all argument is empirically untrue and subsequently exclusive of those for whom this argument does not ring true (Andersen & Collins, 2007; Brooks et al., 2008; Collins, 2009; Chun, & Singh, 2010).

Conceivably, nothing is more illustrative of participants' thoughts about sexual orientation than the language they use to refer to their own sexual identities within – or in

the descriptions of – their videos. As to be expected, participants used linguistical variations when sexually self-identifying. For example, Andie, Deb, Sam, and Sarah all self-identified as women and referred to themselves as both gay and lesbian interchangeably in their videos, as did Lauren who self-identified as genderqueer, whereas Andie, Deb, Sam, and Sarah referred to themselves as gay more often than lesbian. Comparatively, Gregory, Jordon, Kile, Lee, and Thomas self-identified as men and referred to themselves as gay, exclusively. There was an exception to this gender discrepancy, as Jill, a self-identified woman, did refer to herself exclusively as gay. What was far more rare was the occurrence of individuals referring to themselves solely as lesbian (Kristin) or same gender loving (Kaali).

Nearly one-third of participants did not openly identify as gay, lesbian, or same gender loving in their videos. However, most did identify in relation to the LGBTQ communities, their current same-sex relationships, and/or within their video description. In the opening lines of Dennis' video he proclaimed his membership in the "gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community" and then later said that he was "in a partnered relationship with a male, and I'm happy with that" (Cornell, 2012). Likewise, Rafael described himself in relation to others when he explained that "Like many young GLBT folks, I was bullied in high school" and that later in life he found out that "I had friends who were also, it turns out in some cases, gay and lesbian" (ResourceCenterDallas, 2010). Similar to Dennis, Abbie self-identified through twice mentioning her relationship: "myself and my girlfriend" and "dating my awesome girlfriend," and in her video description she stated that sexuality-based language is contestable:

> Note: I use the term "gay" because it's the one I prefer (rather than queer), but it encompasses so much more than the most basic definition of that word. I used it

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for simplicity and accessibility's sakes, but I recognize there are people who identify outside the limitations of that word. This video is for them too. (Abbie, 2012)

Diverging from the patterns outlined above, David, Kevin, Joe, and Kim made no explicit mention of their sexual orientation in the course of their videos, though the former two participants did label themselves within their video descriptions. David referred to himself interchangeably as gay and queer while simultaneously disclosing his religion, profession, and location:

I'm a Gay, Reconstructionist rabbi, living in San Francisco, California…Also, I really lucked out through my involvement with theatre. I found Queer and Queer-friendly community the minute I started working. (Bauer, 2010)

Neither Joe nor Kim explicitly referenced their sexuality, leaving viewers to infer this information from their overall content.

Given the objective Savage initially outlined for the IGBP, the assumption is that IGBP participants are LGBTQ themselves. However, early on in the project's lifecycle, straight-identified allies of all ages and LGBTQ youth themselves contributed videos (Bond, 2010), thereby debunking any preconceived notions of a vlogger's LGBTQ identity. Regardless of a vlogger's age, sexual identity is likely of great importance to IGBP viewers because in a project that is predicated on the very idea that life improves for sexual and gender minorities, it is crucial for viewers to hear from as many self-identified LGBTQ individuals as possible. Moreover, if the IGBP is viewed as an alternative to narrowly-defined mainstream media depictions of LGBTQ individuals, it becomes even more important for viewers to be clear of participants' sexual and gender identities precisely to challenge the stereotypes and myths of LGBTQ individuals. This act of challenging stereotypes is especially important if viewers have either never

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knowingly conversed with an openly LGBTQ person face-to-face, only had minimal

exposure to LGBTQ individuals, or have had negative experiences with LGBTQ people.

Therefore, for participants to leave their sexual identity unstated within the context of the

IGBP – or even to make viewers take the extra step of deciphering their sexual

orientation within video descriptions through inference – it does a disservice because it

only leaves them with further questions and complicates what should be a fairly direct

message. This claim is made in full acknowledgement of Abbie's declaration of sexual

identity language as contested, but I counter that by stating that most viewers are likely

not to the point where they are able to fully comprehend the myriad labels within the

LGBTQ umbrella, and many simply may not read that addendum. Rather, it is probable

that viewers are searching for others like them who are LGBTQ-identified or questioning,

rendering it of utmost importance for viewers to be assured that LGBTQ individuals who

also identify as men, women, and genderqueer exist, period, and have survived

experiences similar to their own. Thus, when participants fail to identify as any of the

above, they run the risk of impairing viewers' overall comprehension and in turn create a

less effective message.

By watching multiple IGBP and counter-narrative "it doesn't get better" videos, it

quickly became apparent to me that participants sexually self-identify in innumerable

ways. Moreover, the sample demonstrated that sometimes there is overlap between the

verbiage used among those of varying gender identities (i.e, self-identified women

labeling themselves interchangeably as gay or lesbian), and at other times the rhetoric is

exclusive to one's gender (i.e., no men identified as lesbians). There are personal and

conceivably political reasons for why individuals who take ownership of their same-sex

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identity opt not to identify by any name within the LGBTQ acronym and instead use language like "same gender loving," as Kaali did. In instances where participants use terminology falling outside of the LGBTQ acronym, it would be beneficial for all viewers if participants indicate briefly *why* those terms are used to educate all and expose the variance within the LGBTQ+ communities.

Another way participants revealed their sexual identities was by mentioning their current relationship status: Half revealed they were dating a member of the same sex, partnered, or married with children – or wore a ring on their left-hand ring finger. While their silence suggests that the remaining half of participants are currently single or perhaps did not find it important to reference their significant other, Jordon was the only participant who stated bluntly that he did not have a boyfriend at the time of filming.

In addition to serving as an indicator of sexual identity, participants' mentioning their current relationship status often signified one of the myriad ways their lives improved over time. Partnered/married participants were quite proud of and alluded to their relationships as a key milestone in their narratives. Yet, the notion of life getting better simply as a result of a romantic relationship runs the risk of turning into a slippery slope argument because relationships alone do not alleviate extreme depression and/or suicidal tendencies, as demonstrated by the countless individuals of all ages, gender, and sexual identifications who have committed suicide while romantically involved with another person. What's more, it is assumed that coupled participants were involved in healthy, non-abusive relationships and by default so will viewers, yet empirical data have shown that intimate partner violence among LGBTQ couples is both on the rise and typically underreported (Amezcua et al., 2012). By inferring or outright declaring that life

gets better *because* of a relationship, participants place an added pressure on viewers to find their own happiness through another at a time in which they may be overwhelmed with figuring out who *they* are as individuals. Having said that, among the other half of participants who did not reference their current relationship status (and even within some who did), there was an emphasis on self-discovery and personal growth, evidenced by statements like Abbie's, "you should be allowed to explore that for yourselves; you should be figuring that out" (Abbie, 2012). Nonetheless, romantic relationships alone cannot account for the bulk of anyone's happiness, regardless of their sexual identity, and any presumption that they can needs to be problematized.

Within the broader relationship discourse, all participants who explicitly disclosed their relationship status declared being part of a *couple* (Jordon excluded). Participants' use of that label had the effect of presenting couplehood as the only acceptable form of LGBTQ relationships, especially when combined with the fact that there were no mentions of polyamorous LGBTQ relationships (outside of Kristin's brief mention of having a poly friend), asexual individuals, or those who prefer to remain uncoupled. This assertion and its implication of monogamy is ironic in light of a *New York Times Magazine* article in which Savage extolls the virtues of non-monogamous marriages like his own (Oppenheimer, 2011). Unquestionably, the inclusion of any relationships beyond traditionally-defined monogamous couplings is a much more controversial topic than same-sex couplings, and participants could have been actively avoiding discussions of anything else because of the slippery slope argument often employed by marriage equality opponents: letting same-sex couples marry opens the door for polygamy, bestiality, pedophilia, incest, and more ("U.S. Election 2012").

Other than relationships, participants talked about life getting better in the sense of finding LGBTQ community through friends, religious institutions, participation in LGBTQ organizations, or creation and/or consumption of LGBTQ media. Participants discussed having friends of multiple sexual orientations and ages, and Kristin described having a particularly diverse social network: "As an adult, I found friends - straight, gay, bi and poly - who love and support me for who I am" (Rivers, 2010). Although Gregory did not specify the sexual orientation of his University of Vermont friends whom he credited for helping him achieve sexual self-acceptance, his group of friends was nonetheless extremely important for his coming out process.

Along with friends, multiple participants explicitly referenced the importance of religion in their lives and in particular finding religious institutions where they were accepted based on their sexual orientation. Juxtaposing the verbal harassment she experienced at her private Christian high school, Jill made it known that she had found a new and more fulfilling church community:

> Today, I attend an American Baptist church right here in Portland, and the pastor of that church has invited my partner and I to get married in their sanctuary next fall, which is something that I would never have imagined happening back then. (PortlandPhoenix, 2010)

In a similar vein, Kristin remarked: "I've even found a church where I'm not tolerated but respected, honored, and cherished" (Rivers, 2010). David, Kevin, and Sarah found or established welcoming religious institutions, and in broadcasting the self-acceptance of their religious and sexual identities, they offered hope to viewers who may be trying to understand their own intersectionality.

The bulk of Sarah's video addressed the intersection of her homosexuality and Christianity, and she labeled it "It Gets Better: Christian and Lesbian," indicative of the order of importance she places on her identities, as was her video description:

> To explore homosexuality in the *Bible*, view my other video at http://www. youtube.com/watch?v=o8ia_JLBVmM. This video was created for the It Gets Better Project -- http://www.youtube.com/itgetsbetterproject -- as a message to Christian GLBT that they are loved by God because they are holy and because they are God's beloved children. (Tupper, 2011)

Under the structural, disciplinary, and hegemonic domains, an abundance of hate speech has been spewed at LGBTQ individuals from various political pundits, candidates, and figures within every level of government; clergypersons of all levels (including the Pope); parishioners of nearly every major world religion; and numerous politically and religiously-affiliated organizations. Much of the sexuality and religion discourse positions sexuality and religion as incompatible entities whereby self-identified LGBTQ people are deemed evil according to individuals' selective interpretations of religious texts, such as the Leviticus 20:13 Biblical passage. Therefore, when LGBTQ-identified individuals stepped forward and shared their stories of hope and others' misinterpretations of religious texts, they created a counter-discourse to what is typically conveyed by various structural institutions (religion, politics, the media, etc.). As participants challenged the religion/ sexuality discourse, they served to educate viewers that all religions or religious institutions are not by default homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic, and there are many welcoming institutions of various denominations. However, this sample was heavily skewed toward Christian-identified individuals, as was participants' religious rhetoric. Participants only went as far as to challenge the discourse as it related to Christianity and Judaism, neglecting to discuss other major world religions

(Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) that viewers may subscribe to, and no mention was made of Pantheism, Agnosticism, or Atheism. Perhaps this was a function of participants only speaking through that which they know (i.e. their own religions) and intentionally not overstepping any real or artificially contrived boundaries, but in doing so the religious-based rhetoric had an exclusionary undertone to those who do not identify as Christian/Jewish.

Participants who stated having found welcoming places of worship lived in medium- to-larger-sized metropolitan areas where welcoming churches are more likely to be found because there is a higher concentration of churches overall. For some viewers, options for religious worship may be geographically limited, particularly while youth live with their parents or guardians and may be forced to attend their preferred religious services. The idea of viewers' lives improving as a function of finding a welcoming religious community that is accepting of sexual diversity is yet another example of something to look forward to in the future – and may hinge on viewers having to leave their hometowns to do so, a fact that went unstated but has direct class implications.

Participation in non-religious LGBTQ-related organizations or events and the creation and/or consumption of LGBTQ media were alternative avenues through which participants proclaimed finding community. By demonstrating their active involvement in LGBTQ-related activities and organizations, participants conveyed that a sense of belonging within the broader LGBTQ communities and de facto happiness were possible expressly through participation. The distance between an individual questioning her/his/zir sexual orientation and joining an LGBTQ organization, volunteering, donating,

or even competing in the Gay Games is vast if not seemingly insurmountable for some,

and little was offered in the way of immediate, tangible resources that were not bound by

physical geographic locations. As Joe vaguely stated:

> There's a lot more information you can get about who you are so you can know what to do. With just a click of a mouse or something on the phone or whatever, you have so much more information. (exeggutor35, 2012)

Joe's statement, in conjunction with others' blanket statements about available

resources, fundamentally failed to provide viewers with a clear list of resources that a

suicidal, depressed, anxious, and confused person could *immediately* benefit from

consulting. Participants made frequent mention of the Trevor Project's services almost in

passing or as a quick plug, yet virtually no explanation was offered to viewers as to what

the Trevor Project is, the services it offers, or how it may be of assistance to questioning

individuals here and now. Rather, participants assumed viewers were already familiar

with the Trevor Project. And while using an IGBP video as a plug for their own blogs

does have a narcissistic bent to it, the information contained in Deb, Lauren, and Lee's

blogs could be of value to viewers if they had explained the blog's focus rather than

simply name-dropping the URL and expecting viewers to eagerly visit. Quite simply,

driving traffic to a blog does nothing more than artificially boost a website's analytics if

the individuals responsible for that traffic are not in a psychological state to digest the

blog's content. Thus, while it is instructive for viewers to hear about what organizations

participants are involved in and what media may be of interest to them at some point in

their journeys, the immediate need for nationwide, easily-accessible resources for their

stage(s) of identity development went unfulfilled.

Community was also implied through participants' verb tenses, specifically in how they referred to themselves and others collectively as "we" or "us." For instance, Kevin spoke about LGBTQ adults collectively in the context of participating in the IGBP:

> Dan Savage and his partner, I believe, have both started this It Gets Better Campaign so that we can tell our stories - for real - to young people so that they know that we didn't just wake up producers or writers or accountants or talk show hosts like Nate Berkus or grown and assured and clear about who we are. (Taylor, 2010)

Echoing Kevin's sentiment, Thomas spoke about LGBTQ individuals collectively when referencing the importance of actively working to make life better as opposed to idly waiting for it to get better. Lee shared Thomas' concern that sexuality is not a choice and encouraged viewers to question their straight friends about their heterosexuality as their friends have questioned them. Lee lumped himself together with other LGBTQ individuals and viewers:

> And they'll just give you this blank stare, and then they will maybe get it that we can't convince ourselves to be attracted to who we are attracted to; it's how we come out of our body's truth. And that's the thing: It's not a lifestyle choice; it's a choice about whether you are going to be honest or not; whether you're going to be authentic about how you truly feel. (Wind, 2010)
> In nearly every participants' video, the pluralized forms of you, "we" and "us," were

used to group together other IGBP participants, IGBP participants and viewers, or LGBTQ individuals more broadly and in effect create a sense of a larger, singular LGBTQ community. LGBTQ community was also instilled through the use of various acronyms and the grouping of sexual and gender minorities. Yet despite participants' best efforts at trying to create community through discourse, the existence of one LGBTQ community is highly contested given numerous divisions within this umbrella term, including but not limited to race, class, and gender. Again, these debates may be far beyond the scope of people questioning their sexuality, but nonetheless it is

inaccurate and problematic to paint a picture of a singular community based on the notion of equality for all *or* a universal LGBTQ experience. Doing so is of grave disservice to racial, class, and gender minorities who are likely unaware that, among other things, "LGBTQ communities of color experience the most severe forms of intimate partner violence" (Amezcua et al., 2012), and transgender persons of color face additional hurdles for health care/access and higher instances of health vulnerabilities such as HIV/AIDS contraction, substance abuse, or suicide attempts (Grant et. al, 2010).

Sexual orientation was front and center within the language participants used to describe others as well, specifically how participants referred to viewers': 1) presumed sexual orientations; 2) subjugation to others' homophobic rhetoric; 3) coming out processes and available resources; and 4) sense of community. This portion of the analysis begins with an examination of the labels participants gave to viewers.

Abbie's video was targeted to "the gay kids of North Carolina." Later she widened her target audience to include "anyone else affected by this," but in doing so Abbie was still presuming a narrow audience within an expansive, worldwide social change project. Like Abbie, Deb referred to her viewers as "gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender youth," and Joe and Sam explained that LGBT youth suicides were the impetus for the IGBP. All three made the assumption that their viewership is comprised of adolescents who are already identifying as LGBT. Broadening the viewership a bit further, Kaali dedicated her video to:

> [t]eens who may be victims of bullying; teens who may be struggling with their self-identity, with their self-worth. Or kids in general who may have two moms or two dads or one mom or one dad who is a member of the same gender loving community - otherwise known as a gay or a lesbian individual. (kynshaune, 2010)

And in the broadest sense, Dennis spoke to viewers in the following manner:

If you have no one to talk to about how you feel about yourself or who you are - whether you're a young teenager or an adult or an older adult who has not come to terms with who they are or even expressed those feelings out loud - I want to offer myself as a person to listen to you. (Cornell, 2012)

Collectively, participants heeded Savage's initial call and not only dedicated their videos to at-risk, LGBT youth, but almost exclusively assumed that youth: 1) would be the only individuals watching their videos; 2) are the only individuals who struggle with their sexual identity; and 3) watching the videos have already adopted an LGBTQ identity. These assumptions are vast and problematic on many levels.

First, just as the video-production pool quickly expanded beyond LGBTQ-identified adults, presumably the IGBP viewership has also expanded beyond youth alone, to include adults who are struggling with their sexual orientation and may not know where else to turn. Certainly, consideration of secondary and tertiary target audiences should always be a consideration for any strategic communication effort, the IGBP included.

The idea that youth are the only segment of the population struggling with their sexuality and/or victimized because of it is intrinsically false. Examples of adults' subjugation to others' verbal and physical harassment on the basis of their perceived status or self-identification as LGBTQ are plentiful, ranging from ongoing media coverage of hate crimes (Heisig, 2013; Rector, 2012; Waugh, 2013), political rhetoric (Condon, 2012; Johnson, 2011; Wong, 2012), and numerous libel and defamation lawsuits filed by adults subjected to others' sexuality-based verbal abuse (Phillips, 2012).

Moreover, the assumption that viewers have already adopted an LGBTQ identity is presumptuous and also likely false. Identity development models would predict a

higher likelihood of viewers' questioning their same-sex attractions, considering

engaging in same-sex behaviors, or already engaging in same-sex behaviors, but not

yet identifying as LGBTQ (Cass, 1984; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger,

1996). Thus, participants' projection and application of this identity is premature for most

viewers and could in fact turn them off from the IGBP altogether because of their fear of

being labeled as anything remotely related to LGBTQ.

Both Deb and Thomas included the term "questioning" in their videos in an effort

to be more inclusive and considerate of viewers who have not adopted an LGBTQ

identity, and Abbie brought up the concepts of sexual exploration and normalization.

Explicit in Abbie's verbiage is the assertion of same-sex behavior as normal, and implicit

within it is the support that both she and unnamed others give to bisexuality or

pansexuality. Because of her video's focus on same-sex marriage, Abbie's articulation of

exploration was limited to sexuality and did not consider gender.

Along with assumptions about viewers' ages and sexual identities, participants

also spoke about the homophobia that was indubitably enveloping viewers and brought

them to the IGBP, specifically hegemonic rhetoric and other notions of structural,

disciplinary, and interpersonal dominance that Thomas declared were responsible for

"way too much repression of people because of their sexuality or their identity" (Tproa,

2010). Kristin dedicated her video to "anyone struggling with the prejudice and

discrimination of being who you are," and later expressed empathy for viewers regarding

"how demeaning it feels even now to have other people who don't know us decide

whose relationship should be legally recognized" (Rivers, 2010). Her former comment

addressed homophobia in its broadest sense, and the latter honed in on structural and

disciplinary oppressions that are part of the ongoing local, state, and federal debates. Like those listed before him, Kevin also referred to power, although beyond the narrow confinement of marriage equality:

> In the midst of all the mess, a rose will rise up from the concrete. It gets better. And sometimes people just don't want you to know that because they don't want you to know how wonderful you are and how great life can be, but it gets better. (Taylor, 2010)

The power Rafael spoke of was neither political nor religious-based when he stepped outside the boundaries of the presumed youth target audience and directly addressed parents, preemptively combatting their homophobic words or actions. He was the only participant in the sample to address parents of the primary target audience, and he stated:

> For the parents: love your children. Keep an eye on them. Make sure that they do not become a statistic. It doesn't matter to me how you feel about the GLBT community. This is our next generation. They are slipping away from us, and this has to stop. Take a moment and make sure that we don't lose another young person. (ResourceCenterDallas, 2010)

Taken together, participants' verbiage about others' homophobia implied several things. First, the implication among many was that adults hold the power and are deserving of being called out because of their homophobic abuse of that power. They shed light on the power dynamic that exists between adults who spew homophobic vitriol at youth, but in doing so, once again participants presumed viewers are almost entirely youth. Furthermore, participants actively acknowledged that bullying does not come from peers alone, but rather from politicians, parents, religious figures, and beyond, yet participants' acknowledgements of and references to other forms of bullying were dwarfed by their overall sentiment focusing on their own survival of peers' attacks or encouragement and limited advice for how viewers could also survive peers' attacks.

Second, institutionally participants claimed homophobia was exclusively relegated to schools, religious institutions, the home front, and the political pulpit. It is commendable that participants acknowledged homophobic words and actions take place beyond school borders, but these mentions pale in comparison to the overarching sentiment about where bullying takes place (in school), by whom (peers), and to whom it is done (youth).

Outside discussions of homophobia, participants offered viewers hope and encouragement as they continue to make their way through grade school, and this positive sentiment included both concrete and abstract statements. Concrete examples include Kaali's assertion that viewers have agency in their current situation:

> If you need some help, contact someone, reach out, and get help. Don't allow words - don't allow people who decide that you should be a victim to push you to the limit of cutting your life short. (kynshaune, 2010)

Through self-realization and self-confidence, Lauren asserted viewers do not have to stay in a constant state of anxiety and depression or continue their self-torture, "all you need is the confidence and knowing yourself, and you can escape" (Leahashra, 2010).

By putting forth their e-mail addresses, social media based contact information, or personal website URLs, several participants extended themselves as ambassadors of hope beyond the confines of their one-way YouTube videos. In their videos, Kevin and Dennis recited their e-mail addresses and strongly encouraged viewers to contact them electronically in times of desperation. Dennis extended an offer to correspond with viewers about themselves or their friends, and in the process he revealed one of his motivations for participating in the IGBP:

> So here is my e-mail address. It's rainbowambassador@gmail.com. Please feel free to e-mail me. We can chat, talk about how you're feeling about yourself or a

friend. I can guarantee I won't always have the right answer or any answer at all, but I can also guarantee that I will listen to you; I will do my best to be there for you; and I will hopefully be for you what I didn't have when I was growing up. (Cornell, 2012)

Additionally, both Jordon and Sam included their Facebook contact information within their video descriptions so that viewers could "friend" them on the popular social networking site. Participants also recommended other resources: More than one-third of the sample pointed viewers to the Trevor Project.

Abstractions of hope and encouragement were offered by some participants in the form of generalized statements about life getting better post-secondary school, having role models to look up to and support groups to consult, and seemingly unfounded guarantees that they will make it through whatever they are facing simply because participants themselves had done so. An example of hollow statements of life getting better, Kile assured viewers that, "There's so much out here for a great life, a great life, and people will respect you and they will admire you for who you are" (Ozier, 2010). In trying to comfort viewers and assure them that they have people with whom they can talk about their sexuality, Joe debunked the notion that viewers are all alone, "To all the kids out there that are feeling like they don't have anybody they can talk to or that you don't have anything to look up or check on, it's not true. You do" (exeggutor35, 2012). Similarly, Kaali alerted viewers to the faceless, but numerous people that love them and are thinking about them in the present and will think about them in the future:

> The support groups are there. You have a lot of people that love you, a lot of people that are thinking of you, and a lot of people that care about you and what you have to offer - not just right now, but later down the road. (kynshaune, 2010)

The act of participating in the IGBP, sharing one's story, and trying to offer hope and encouragement to suicidal LGBTQ and questioning individuals whom participants

have never met is commendable, yet at times the manner in which this was done was questionable, at best. Without fail, all participants' videos featured at least one if not more vapid statements about life getting better that functioned as little more than filler. Some even went so far as to repeat the phrase "it gets better" over and over again as if merely saying it aloud can will it to be true, and on occasion what participants stated was entirely too simplistic, such as suggestions not to listen to bullies or to just get lost in one's own head. While these suggestions may be applicable to someone who is receiving the occasional nickname or verbal jab, to a person who is frequently the target of others' verbal and physical assaults, this advice is likely going to go in one ear and out the other – if viewers even get far enough into the videos to hear it. Likewise, if viewers continue to hear similar sexuality-based sentiment over and over again, they may quickly move on from the IGBP and come to the conclusion that participants do not understand their experiences and/or cannot be of assistance in their present time of need. Participants can be of some assistance because they have faced experiences that likely resemble viewers' own in some form. Assistance could take the shape of viewers contacting participants via e-mail, Facebook, blogs, etc., but what was noticeably lacking is any directive for viewers to either leave participants feedback in the comments section or use YouTube's direct-messaging feature.

The efficacy of participants' abstract statements about how viewers' lives would get better related to their sexual orientation is also questionable. Undoubtedly it can help suicidal individuals to remind them that they are loved and that they likely have support from others, but participants run the risk of viewers tuning out and not fully processing their messages if the content is not applicable to their situation. Rather than regurgitating

the phrase "it gets better" over and over again or hypothetically listing role models and support groups, it would be more beneficial for participants to spend time explaining in what ways viewers could anticipate their lives improving concerning sexual orientation, how to make it better in the interim, and pointing viewers toward role models and support groups from which they can obtain help.

The logic behind participants' statements conveying a message of "I did it, so you can too" flies in the face of viewers' multidimensional realities: it is utterly impossible for participants to know exactly what challenges viewers face and if/how those challenges truly can be overcome. Lumping viewers into one universal experience of victimization and survival also blatantly contradicted any claims of viewers as "special," "unique," or truly "different" from anyone else, as participants commonly used as rationale for why viewers should stay alive. Granted, when this sentiment is grounded in the larger discourse of participants' attempting to take their own lives because of sexual orientation-based victimization and either physically failing to do so or mentally changing their minds, it does carry more weight. Nonetheless, everyone's situation is different, making it prudent to steer clear of abstract IGBP messaging that could be of little good to the suicidal individuals with tunnel vision of their own realities.

Alongside messages of hope and encouragement, participants assured viewers that they are not alone: Some participants articulated that viewers are already part of the larger LGBTQ communities, whereas others discussed how viewers would find their own communities later in life. When participants spoke of viewers as a part of the collective "LGBTQ community" to which participants also belonged, they did so by using the pronouns "we" and "us." Illustrative of this sentiment was Lauren's proclamation that

LGBTQ people are everywhere, "There is so much out here for you. There are so many of us; there's millions of us. We're online. We're probably next door to you or in your school too" (Leahashra, 2010). In the closing lines of their videos, Kristin and Thomas also declared, "we [LGBTQ people] really are out here" (Rivers, 2010), and that "we're all here for you" (Tproa, 2010), respectively.

As opposed to corralling viewers into a larger LGBTQ community in the present, participants talked about how viewers would inevitably find community later in their lives in college or other undefined phases of adulthood. Kim ecstatically reported having found a large, welcoming community of people upon coming to The College of William & Mary and asserted the same would be true for viewers, "I mean you have people here that support you, that care about you, and there's a big community of people just like you" (qubiz33, 2011). Along the same lines, while pitching the Gay Games to viewers, Kile also pledged that viewers would find other gay friends later in life:

> And that's just one of hundreds and hundreds of things out here in the world that are waiting to embrace you. Whatever are your interests, there are groups of guys and gals who are also gay and are just waiting to be your friends. I'm telling you, don't hurt yourself; don't hurt yourself. Stick it out. It's rough. I can only imagine how rough it is, but if you can hang on, I'm here, we are all here and we're queer, and we may not ever get used to it, but it's certainly better than what you are having to go through now. (Ozier, 2010)

Kile did not specify *when* viewers would inevitably meet other gay men and women with whom they would become friends and enjoy a sense of community, nor whom these faceless individuals are, and neither did David. Instead, David spoke generically about the importance of finding community and the likelihood that will happen for viewers in adulthood:

> So, finding your own community, finding the people who really know you and around whom you can relax, makes all the difference, and you get more and more

opportunities to do that the older you get. So - hang in there; take a lot of deep breaths. Don't stop breathing, and know that it gets better. (Bauer, 2010)

The concept of community is an alluring one, especially when adults are trying to convince youth that they have a life worth living and get them to see what their lives could be like beyond grade school. Nevertheless, by automatically including viewers within a broader, unified LGBTQ community, participants' good intentions could be misconstrued and make viewers even more fearful of pursuing answers to their sexuality-based questions or to come out altogether. At this stage in their identity development, viewers are likely to be quite fearful of anything marked "gay," "pride," or containing LGBTQ identifiers of any sort (rainbow flags, pink triangles, bear paws, etc.). It is one thing to be questioning your own sexuality privately, but it is quite another to want to socialize with unknown LGBTQ people by joining groups, clubs, organizations, etc. centered on LGBTQ issues; willingly visit an LGBTQ center, bar, or other public meeting place; to self-identify as or have others label you as LGBTQ in any way; or to have pride in your sexuality. The process of "learning to be proud" is one that takes time, especially when potentially coming to grips with a sexual minority status susceptible to multiple structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal oppressions.

Playing the numbers game is problematic as well. As participants throw numbers around, such as "thousands of kids just like you," or "millions of us out here," once again, they are speaking in the abstract without really offering anything more to viewers than just their words, and a strength-in-numbers argument may be well intended but could mean very little or absolutely nothing to someone with tunnel-vision. If someone is suicidal, then her/his/zir concern is probably not about others going through the same process of self-discovery, let alone those who have already gone through it.

Furthermore, informing viewers that they are needed to boost numbers in ongoing LGBTQ social justice battles is premature considering viewers probably have not come out yet, if they are indeed LGBTQ, or they may simply be questioning their sexuality. The chasm between where viewers are presumably situated in their own sexual identity development and becoming an LGBTQ activist is vast, and it is far too much for participants to demand of viewers at this stage. Oftentimes in the course of the community rhetoric it seemed as if participants were forgetting how long it took them to take the very steps they are proposing to viewers, but, like most, participants probably did not do so overnight. While it is admirable that participants are trying to calm viewers down and inform them that they are not alone, to viewers the sheer thought of an LGBTQ community could be overwhelming, and imposing unwanted community on viewers could serve as a roadblock on their quest for answers.

On the other hand, thoughts of a community later down the road could be helpful, but again when offered as something concrete, not abstract. Claims of gay men and women "just waiting to be your friends" (Ozier, 2010) once you cross the threshold of high school are patently false and could be setting viewers up for disappointment if community is promised and then not delivered, for any number of reasons. Similarly, it is precarious for participants to exclaim that since they found community through their college, naturally viewers will do the same. First, not all viewers are financially or intellectually able to go to college. Second, not all college communities are LGBTQ-friendly or conducive to those questioning their orientation (Phoenix, 2011; Rankin et al., 2010). Third, simply because one person has found community in a certain locale does not mean others will, and the list goes on. Moreover, participants simply informing

viewers that they need to find community is probably not news to them, but to tell them that it, too, is something that will happen "when you're older" could be disconcerting at a crucial time period.

Community is a loaded term that is defined differently depending on who is asked to do so, and it is risky for anyone to promise another person "community." In doing so, participants run the risk of alienating viewers who either cognitively are not ready for any sort of LGBTQ community association, or think that having to wait until adulthood to find a community may not be worth the wait.

Considering how participants referred to themselves and others, certain terminology was preferable and other terms were neglected altogether. While most participants referred to themselves or others as gay, lesbian, queer, or part of the LGBT/GLBT communities, three participants used the term homosexual in the course of their videos, a term that GLAAD stated has "a clinical history and pejorative connotations that are routinely exploited by anti-gay extremists to suggest that lesbians and gay men are somehow diseased or psychologically/emotionally disordered" (GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 2010, p. 15). Furthermore, there was just one mention of asexual individuals in the context of Thomas' usage of the extended LGBTQA acronym, and Kristin was the only participant to mention polyamory when referencing a friend. What language participants did not include is as illustrative as what they did (Huckin, 2002), and no mentions of the following sexual orientation-based terminology were made: Two-Spirit, pansexual, fluid, and sexual preference. The list of slang terms for LGBTQ individuals is quite extensive and varies by geographic locale, and for the most part,

participants refrained from using slang (i.e., femme, lipstick lesbian, bear, twinks, etc.) altogether.

Non-verbal Communication

In conjunction with what participants verbally communicated in their videos, their non-verbal communication conveyed additional information pertaining to sexual orientation, specifically by directing viewers to various resources, self-promoting their own LGBTQ-related blogs/websites, or including other sexuality signifiers (apparel, logos, etc.). While several mentioned the Trevor Project in their videos, some created a slide containing Trevor Project information and featured it either in the middle or end of their video. The design of these slides was relatively simplistic, as they clearly had a homemade look to them, as if quickly thrown together. The slides included little more than the words "Trevor Project," the organization's toll-free 24/7 suicide hotline phone number, and/or its URL, as the screenshot from Andie's video displays below:

Figure 7:

None of the participants used the Trevor Project's official logo, opting to avoid any trademark infringement and create their own graphics using a variety of colors and font

sizes. No other LGBTQ-specific non-profit organizations from which at-risk LGBTQ youth could seek support were featured in participants' non-verbal communication, and by showcasing the Trevor Project, participants (un)intentionally drew attention to one of the IGBP's financial benefactors. They also appeared to be simply repeating what they had heard others say/do as opposed to offering additional resources that also could be helpful to viewers.

Others used their videos as an opportunity for self-promotion by drawing attention to blogs, websites, or organizations that they had a personal affiliation with and either directly or indirectly told viewers to visit them through their verbiage. Lee displayed his blog's URL by wearing it on his chest and showcasing his blog's tagline: "I'm here. I'm queer. What do I read?":

Figure 8:

Dennis also intentionally wore a long-sleeved T-shirt to draw attention to the Kentucky Fairness Alliance. By including their personal or affiliated website, blog, or organizational information, participants demonstrated putting thought into what they were going to wear before filming and how they were going to drive traffic to their

personal websites. They also demonstrated their membership with different facets of the

LGBTQ communities, such as creators of original LGBTQ content or organizational

leaders, sending a message to viewers that they are part of a larger community that

extends beyond, and outside of, the IGBP. It was apparent that many made calculated

decisions that the average viewer may not be aware of upon first glance, but when

examined closely, it is quite clear that some participants did not simply flip on the camera

and start talking. Instead, they prepared with notes or scripts and planned what

additional sexual orientation-centric information to convey non-verbally.

Although he did not wear any self- or organizational-branded clothing, Kevin

provided viewers with his e-mail address. The phrase "It Gets Better," his title (Elder

Reverend), full name, location, and e-mail address were all included in a white banner

that comprised the bottom quarter of his screen throughout his entire video, as shown

below:

Figure 9:

By verbally and non-verbally including their contact information, Dennis and Kevin sent a

strong message that they were serious about viewers contacting them and that despite

whatever impression they give off based on their age, occupation, race, class, gender, etc., they are approachable to anyone who may need their assistance. Given their leadership roles and duties in the church and an LGBTQ advocacy organization, respectively, and the fact that both men are fathers, Dennis and Kevin's invitation for youth to contact them was not out of the ordinary.

Beyond the inclusion of homemade slides or signage, Gregory and Rafael both incorporated professional-looking logos into their videos. In the final few seconds of Greg's video, a modified It Gets Better Project logo popped up in Simmons College's school colors. Collectively, Simmons College submitted 33 videos for the IGBP, and each of these videos featured the same logo in the closing few seconds, indicating symmetry was a branding decision likely made by those tasked with editing the videos. Simmons College staff decided to appropriate the logo and make it their own. Both the original IGBP purple logo and the modified Simmons College blue logo are illustrated below for comparison:

Figure 10:   Figure 11:
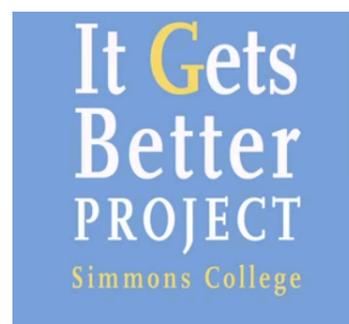
Similarly, Rafael filmed his video outside of his office building with the Resource Center Dallas logo located just over his right shoulder and gave RCD additional publicity and created brand awareness through the video:

Figure 12:

The strategic placement of the logo added credibility to what he verbalized in his video and reinforced the fact that Rafael was indeed employed by the non-profit organization. Because his video was uploaded using RSD's account, the YouTube account name and the logo worked together to draw viewers' attention to the organization.

None of the videos featured any stereotypical LGBTQ symbols, such as rainbows of any sort, Human Rights Campaign blue and yellow equal signs, inverted pink triangles, double female or male symbols, lambda symbols, etc. Additionally, there were no background pictures of identifiably gay men or lesbians, let alone two men or two women together holding hands, kissing, or otherwise showing affection and identifying as a couple (except Kaali's wedding pictures). On the whole, there was very little explicitly lesbian or gay iconography in the videos whatsoever rendering it necessary to listen to the participants' verbiage in order to grasp or infer that they identified as gay or lesbian. Instead of presenting an explicit indication of sexuality non-verbally, participants presented viewers with a very normative vision of what it means to be LGBTQ.

Participants put forth assimilationist imagery of their lives as just like anyone else's, straight or gay, perhaps in a calculated attempt to prevent coming off as "too gay" or "too lesbian" or "too queer" and effectively scaring viewers away.

The Matrix of Domination and the IGBP Videos

As Collins' (2000) stated, "the media and other cultural institutions reproduce ideas by identifying which ideas are valuable, which are not, and which should not be heard at all" (p. 275). Although Collins made this claim in reference to her analysis of traditional media representation, the MCDA of the IGBP videos has shown that this sentiment extends to new media as well: participants' actively reproduce the identities that are valuable and for which "it gets better." Through their explicit and implicit race, class, gender, and sexual orientation-based rhetoric, participants provided a narrow conceptualization of LGBTQ individuals that served as an outlet for the projection of their own identities onto others and the creation and dissemination of myths.

The presence of the matrix of domination within the IGBP's content was identifiable even before I analyzed the videos, such that the sample of participants obtained for this study was indicative of possible systematic oppressions that may prevent some individuals from participating in the IGBP, an academic study on the IGBP, or both. While LGBTQ studies typically rely on narrow samples and this study is more inclusive than most, the sample was comprised of more self-identified White individuals of middle class or higher status than those of other racial or class identities, which ties back directly to the question, for whom does it get better? According to this sample, it gets better for self-identified White, middle class or higher (college-educated

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professionals with disposable time and income), gender conforming gay men or lesbians, largely to the exclusion of others falling outside of these categories.

Participants' have little to no control over their racial, class, gender, and sexual identities, but they represent one part of the whole concerning diversity within the IGBP. Moreover, "intersecting oppressions are contained" (Collins, 2000, p. 228) within the IGBP in that at least as far as this sample is concerned, there is little variation amongst race, class, gender, or sexual identities within the IGBP, which has ramifications not just for the broader issue of LGBTQ media representation, but more pertinently to audience reception. Some viewers may not take the time to listen to participants' videos if they see a sea of White, middle class or higher, gender and sexuality conforming individuals within the IGBP, rendering the project a failure according to the goal Savage and Miller set out to achieve.

Beyond media representation and the potential for audience dismissal, the IGBP videos revealed larger issues at play that are directly tied to the matrix of domination, specifically what participants' projected onto their presumed viewership and the myths that were (re)created through the project. As participants spoke explicitly or implicitly about their own racial, class, gender, and sexual identities, more often than not they erroneously projected their own identities onto viewers and effectively dismissed the presence of the matrix of domination and its impact on viewers' abilities to have lives that "get better." By rarely discussing the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation or ties between intersecting identities and the systematic organization of oppression (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, or interpersonal), participants put forth

an overarching myth of life improving over time *regardless* of one's racial, class, gender, or sexual identity.

Having thoroughly examined race, class, gender, and sexual orientation within participants' verbal and non-verbal IGBP video communication, I now turn to an analysis of their own words gathered through video chat-based in-depth interviews. In the next portion of this analysis, I sought to understand their motivations for IGBP participation (and answer RQ#2), gain a deeper understanding of the individuals behind the videos, and respond to criticisms that MCDA fails short methodologically because it does not take into account producers of texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Before answering RQ#2, it is helpful for readers to have an understanding of when, where, and how participants first learned about the IGBP as well as the types of videos they watched before and after creating their own. Both components provide insight into participants' level of familiarity and engagement with the IGBP, which directly highlights their motivations for participation.

The majority of participants learned about the IGBP within the first six months of its launch, and all learned about it in one of three ways: from social media/the Internet, Savage, or their own offline social networks. More specifically, participants who were introduced to the IGBP through social media watched videos that appeared in their Facebook news feed; were introduced to Savage and Miller's video by a YouTube algorithm; read about it on gay-themed blogs; or responded with sweeping statements such as "through social media." Similarly, some stumbled across it while surfing the Internet, and IGBP news coverage led others to the project, including Savage's blog postings, syndicated *Stranger* columns, and TV appearances. Lastly, offline social networks, such as school colleagues and college professors, alumni organizations, and friends, directed others to the IGBP.

Early in the interview process, I asked participants about the types of IGBP videos they watched, and as expected, there was variance among the types and number of videos watched as well as how long participants remained interested in following the IGBP. All referenced watching videos by everyday folks like themselves, as David put it

best: "I also watched a number of 'nerds and their laptops,' like myself" (L. Phillips,

personal communication, July 31, 2012). Several participants watched celebrity videos,

and those who did tended to be younger than those declaring celebrity videos were the

type "I look at the least" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 18, 2012), as Kevin

declared and David reiterated. Commonly participants watched a narrow selection of

videos pertinent to their own identities or occupations. Andie watched "mostly female

videos…because they were definitely more along the lines of what I've experienced

personally" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012), whereas Dennis and

Sam's viewings of military-themed videos and Jill and Kaali's viewings of politicians and

other public officials aligned with their professions. Similar to viewing patterns resulting

from gender or profession, Sarah described being drawn to videos by other Christians:

> Because I am a Christian, and so that was like the genre that I looked into. So how are Christians who are GLBT responding within this project. For the most part I watched most of them that related to or had those two tied together, but I haven't really gone much further outside of that. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 19, 2012)

> In contrast, Deb, Kevin, and Lee recounted watching numerous types of videos

with varying levels of long-term zeal, and Deb identified as more than just a passive

viewer:

> I'm subscribed to it on YouTube, and I go in and I try to watch as many as I can…to compliment and encourage people who have recorded the videos because it does take courage. It really does. So whether they're gay, straight, or whatever, I always seek to put a positive comment on there, because I know there are going to be people who don't, and thank them for their message. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 13, 2012)

For Kevin, watching IGBP videos "became one of my afternoons, and it really became

personal because It Gets Better has so many reverberations to it" (L. Phillips, personal

communication, July 18, 2012), and Lee viewed "a ton" of videos upon learning about

the IGBP, but over time he complained of "drowning in information" and found it to be "overwhelming." Lee later added that he watched videos occasionally but is now "interested in the unexpected, like the gay Orthodox Jews" as well as sports teams' videos, such as the Philadelphia Phillies: "I'm really curious to watch it and see if they're acknowledging how they're actually perpetuating the prejudice they're saying to not do" (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 15, 2012). Lee explained the irony of the Phillies creating an anti-bullying message while continuing to haze new pitchers by making them run onto the diamond wearing a pink backpack and feather boa. What was especially interesting was that only a handful of participants mentioned at any point ever having seen Savage and Miller's video. After offering information indicative of IGBP engagement, I now present the categorizations that emerged from the interview data.

Motivations for Participation

My synthesizing of the 414 single-spaced pages of transcribed data revealed four main categorizations pertaining to motivations for participation: 1) camaraderie; 2) rectification; 3) media representation; and 4) positionality. Each category consists of sub-categories, indicated by subheadings that employ participants' own words, and all categories and sub-categories are explicated in full below. It is crucial to note that for *all* participants, their reasons for participation in the IGBP were multidimensional.

<u>*Camaraderie*</u>

When participants were asked why they participated in the IGBP, many responded with sentiment indicative of their beliefs that, although they do not personally know their presumed viewers, they felt a sense of camaraderie with them as if they were kindred spirits because of the hardships they all face(d). In this section, three sub-

categories are explored, including participants': 1) recognition of viewers' stories within their own; 2) experiences with suicidality; and 3) camaraderie with IGBP co-founder and media personality Dan Savage.

"I Recognized My Story in Theirs"

Given that Savage's original objective was to get LGBTQ adults to record messages of hope for suicidal LGBTQ youth, it was not surprising that on some level, nearly all mentioned seeing at least a portion of their own life story in that of their presumed viewership. All had experienced prejudice or discrimination in some capacity as a result of their sexual orientation at minimum, if not other demographic factors as well. In experiencing that prejudice and living to tell about it, participants wanted to demonstrate to viewers that they understood their pain and "were there for them."

As referenced in the chapter's opening paragraphs, participants' realizations that the IGBP is targeting individuals once (or still) like them occurred at different times. For example, Deb submitted a video within the first week of the project's launch, and when asked why she participated responded:

> So I know the frightening environment; I know what it's like to think you're wrong or bad and not be able to talk to anybody about that. And then you put bullying on top of that, where people are being harassed- so that it's just really important. It was important for me to have kids know today that it does get better - high school is temporary - and that there's a whole beautiful world out there waiting for them. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 13, 2012)

Nearly one week after Deb uploaded her IGBP video, David contributed his own on October 4, 2010, and spoke of coming to the realization that, like many at-risk LGBTQ youth, he was a "survivor" who had "really been through a lot." David elaborated:

> I guess I felt a kinship with the kids that were hurting themselves and recognized my story in theirs. And I knew I had experience and authority to use, and I could. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 31, 2012)

Comparatively, Kim's video was included on the YouTube channel several months later as one part of a larger series. Despite the lag between Rutgers student Tyler Clementi's suicide on September 22, 2010, and her video submission on April 7, 2011, Kim explained the impact Clementi's suicide had on her, which resulted in a felt sense of collegiality:

> I felt a personal connection. I guess I put myself in the situation of a student like Tyler Clementi and that even regardless of sexual orientation, that is horrible. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 6, 2012)

> Others expressed similar sentiment as well. According to Joe, he was intimately familiar with being verbally and physically harassed in his youth:

> My own personal experiences when it comes to the recent increase of gay teen suicides and gay bullying. Being a victim of bullying, I decided I could possibly share my story even though the time frame was a little crunched for what I could do with that. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

> After a friend introduced him to the IGBP, Jordon watched several videos and quickly realized that he, too, had "a story to tell." Similarly, although his experience growing up was quite different than Joe's in terms of victimization, Thomas recognized that his story of "making it through to the other side" could be beneficial for potential viewers:

> I felt that if I can show that I made it through it and I had pretty good life and that I made it to the other side, that someone might find it and might relate to it and it might help them get through it as well. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

> Ascertaining that participants recognized some aspect of themselves among the IGBP's target audience aligns with other researchers' findings about why people participate in various projects. The first step in participating in nearly anything – whether online or offline – is to determine that some sort of personal connection exists

(Bonaccorsi & Rossi, 2004; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997). While crowdsourced entities vary tremendously in intention and scope, and participants' motivations vary accordingly (Brabham, 2010a, 2010b), the IGBP was not much different with regard to this finding. As I dug deeper into the rationale for their participation, participants revealed multiple reasons for why they "recognized my story in theirs," including the personal impact of suicide in their lives, detailed next.

"It was going to be by hanging"

Not all who participated in the IGBP project, within this study's sample or beyond, have been suicidal during their lives, and among those who were, suicidality ranged from ideation to attempts. The impact of suicide was instrumental in persuading over half of participants to share their stories because they had been suicidal themselves, were at risk for being suicidal, or had experienced the loss of family members, close friends, or colleagues.

As mentioned in the quote above, Joe stated that "the time frame was a little crunched" in reference to the limits set forth by the IGBP, and he explained, "I could spill out a whole book if I wanted to about things that have happened to me" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012). Within that book would be a detailed description of the extensive verbal and physical abuse he endured throughout grade school that ultimately drove him to plan his suicide. I asked Joe what had set him off – and stopped him – the day he planned to hang himself, and he replied:

> I'm gonna say fear. There was such a deep pain. Like it was an actual pain in my heart and in my stomach about that. I remember going home that day after getting into that altercation and being penalized for it, and I was like I didn't even do anything. I was attacked! I didn't fight him! I tried to go the other way. I guess turning the other cheek doesn't always work. But I sat at home crying, and I was like, what else can I do? I think this stops here for me. That's what I said to

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myself. And I did bring the extension cord - in my backpack - but I think that it was initially the fear, and then I had a breakdown also during lunchtime. I remember I got my food, and I didn't eat; I just gave it to everybody else. People thought that was a bit odd. And I remember sitting there, and I just cried. I just cried, cried, cried, cried, cried. And no one came to my aide except for the Theatre Arts teacher. She saw that I was crying. Apparently because it was so bad everybody knew who I was at school, even though I didn't know them - the teachers, assistant teachers, visiting people - they knew who I was because my peers made it seem that I was just this big raging, closet homo case that they just had to use to exploit, and I wasn't. I didn't talk to people, and if I did, it was very little, if anything, I said. And people just manipulated that. But the fear was really what stopped me - and also being humiliated, because I never told anybody I was, but I guess it appeared on my face that there was something not right. And I still don't know who that was to this day who went and told the counselors, and I remember sitting in my sixth-period class and laying my head on the desk. And I remember my counselors came outside of my class door, and they asked for me. And I kind of looked up, and I looked out, and I saw all the counselors. And I was like, oh God, something happened. So they came there and talked to me and told me I shouldn't let people ridicule me about my "lifestyle." I hate that word. Things like that. They came there, and they humiliated me also. That was humiliating. But the ultimate humiliation was when another teacher across from my class, called me from my class over to her class, and she basically just belched out really mean things to me, saying that, "I don't ever want to hear about you wanting to hurt yourself or anything like this" in front of everybody in her class. And I have resented her for that to this day. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Taking it a step further than Joe, Kile tried to hang himself and attributed his failed

attempt to a logistical error:

I was despondent about other things and tried to kill myself in high school, and fortunately I was not a good knot tier, so the rope broke. I fell to the ground, and I didn't do it again. I'm glad I stuck around, and that's my motivation. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 30, 2012)

Others made passing reference to their suicidality, such as Kristin's comment that she

had a "suicide attempt when I was 14" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25,

2012).

Alongside stories of suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts, some participants

indicated they were not suicidal but certainly *could have been*, such as Deb's comment,

"I easily, for a number of reasons, could have committed suicide, and I didn't" (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 13, 2012). David and Andie expressed similar sentiment, including David's explanation of peers regularly subjugating him to verbal and physical abuse:

> I realized that I was a survivor, and I really have been through a lot. And that also it's only by the grace of God that I was not more isolated, more suicidal by nature. I mean that: I had absolutely everything I needed to end up like one of them, like one of the kids who was lost. I had daily abuse in school; I had well-meaning parents who complained to the school officials, who complained to the kids, who then made life worse for me. I have just as much. I had more abuse than anybody deserves or anybody needs, and I somehow survived. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 30, 2012)

Although he was not "more suicidal," David's experience made him want to share his story of survival with viewers and provide them with hope to make it through their own present challenges, a commonality among all non-suicidal participants.

Research has shown that peer abuse is correlated with youth suicide, as is a lack of support systems, whether from family, friends, churches, social groups/organizations, or otherwise (Gibson, 1989; Haas et al., 2011; Meyer, 1995; Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994; Weber, 2008). Andie still does not have the support of her family to come out externally, but her friends were literal lifesavers:

> If I had been anybody else, I probably would have been at a much higher risk factor for that. If I didn't have people in my life always telling me there are always better things to do than just ending your own life. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Enduring the pain of losing close friends to suicide served as an impetus for Rafael and Sam to participate in the IGBP, though Sam was less upfront about her loss in her video than was Rafael. In our interview, Rafael explained that he and his now

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deceased friend attended a tight-knit K-12 private school together while growing up in

Fort Worth, TX, and the death occurred shortly after:

> I had a friend of mine kill himself at the age of 25. He never identified as gay, but
> if you were to go back – and I've thought about it a lot over the years – I'm fairly
> certain he was questioning. He only had – as best I could tell - one relationship
> with a girl. There is a whole lot on the personal level to do it. (L. Phillips, personal
> communication, July 23, 2012)

Likewise, Sam recounted the devastation of also losing a close family friend, which

served as a motivation to share her story despite not mentioning her loss in the video:

> My lifelong friend committed suicide, and she wasn't gay, but that doesn't matter.
> She was having a hard time, and no one was there for her - she didn't feel like
> anybody was there for her - and so she committed suicide. And so when I had
> seen that these videos were coming up, and they were about kids getting bullied
> and kids taking their own lives, that hit home for me. (L. Phillips, personal
> communication, July 24, 2012)

It was not the loss of close friends that triggered Kim and Sarah to film IGBP

videos but rather suicides among colleagues at their colleges. Both relayed stories of

multiple students committing suicide during their tenures at The College of William &

Mary and Wheaton College, respectively, and even though they did not know the

individuals who passed, the sheer fact that it happened led them to want to participate in

the youth-focused suicide prevention project.

From watching participants' videos in conjunction with several hundred other

IGBP videos before conducting the interviews, I had anticipated that suicidality

discussions would be a part of their narratives. However, I was unprepared for what Jill

and Jordon told me: both lost siblings to suicide within the six months of our interviews.

When I asked Jill why she had participated in the IGBP, among the multiple answers

given she stated, "I recently lost my sister actually, to suicide, not even four months ago"

(L. Phillips, personal communication, July 21, 2012). Her older sister had battled with

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mental health issues for years and took her own life *after* Jill filmed her individual IGBP

video but *before* participating in a Maine Democratic Party group video. To be expected,

Jill revealed that filming the group video was "much more challenging to do" than the first

(L. Phillips, personal communication, July 23, 2012).

Similarly, Jordon lost his younger brother in January 2012, though unlike Jill's, his

loss was unexpected. Jordon also described a burgeoning suicide epidemic in his

hometown:

> My community where I live, there's really something going on that a lot of people
> just don't understand. In the past two years in this community alone - in this
> county - 13 kids have committed suicide, and then within the last five there has
> been about 18. So much so that I remember having discussions where I'm
> surprised that somebody higher up hasn't looked into what's going on here. In
> fact, one of them was my little brother back in January. (L. Phillips, personal
> communication, August 6, 2012)

Jordon filmed both of his IGBP videos before his brother passed, so that familial loss did

not serve as an impetus for his participation, but the loss of several others in his

community certainly did. Jordon's heart-wrenching, geographically concentrated suicide

experiences were unique among participants.

Whether through suicidal ideation, planning, or attempts, or completion by those

close to them, participants expressed a deep understanding of the mental anguish that

some viewers are likely going through. Some participants expressed a sense of

comradeship with potential viewers in part because of suicidality, and others felt a

kinship with Savage that played a role in their desire to participate in the IGBP, as

explained in the next section.

"I Really Like Dan Savage"

Succinctly, Savage is a controversial public figure with enemies inside and outside of the LGBTQ communities who have labeled him racist, classist, sexist, anti-lesbian, biphobic, and transphobic, among other terms (Alex, 2012; Angry Black Woman, 2011), prompting the recent development of the "Fuck No, Dan Savage!" Tumblr explicitly to challenge "the douchebaggery of Dan Savage of 'It Gets Better' (for privileged queers only) fame" (Kerry, Christy, & Em, 2013). Savage's own methods of attacking conservative, anti-gay politicians – such as glitterbombing, which entails citizens throwing handfuls of glitter on a public figure as an act of protest – have been used against him by LGBTQ-identified folks (Avery, 2012; "Dan Savage Gets Glitterbombed," 2011). When I asked Jill what she thought about media criticism of Savage in combination with the IGBP, before I had finished my question, she was emphatically nodding her head yes and asserted, "Dan Savage is such a polarizing figure in our community. People either love him or hate him" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 21, 2012). Later Jill divulged that she was a fan of Savage and an avid reader of his *Stranger* column, "Savage Love," and in a similar vein, Thomas reported that he reads *The Stranger's* blog "fairly regularly, like pretty much every day" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012). Neither went as far as to state explicitly that Savage's co-founder status was an impetus for their participation, but had they – or any participants – been fervently against Savage or his rhetoric, it is likely that their disgust could have prevented them from contributing. Nonetheless, when participants spoke of Savage, more often than not they did so positively, such as Gregory's proclamation, "I really like Dan Savage; I read his book *The Kid*; so good, love

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him. I'm probably biased because I love the project because I probably couldn't criticize it if I tried" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012).

For Joe, Savage's celebrity status was a key contributor to his IGBP video development because Joe felt that he and Savage shared similar challenges while growing up, including but not limited to religion. Joe learned of the IGBP upon seeing Savage on television and was hooked instantly:

> Seeing Dan Savage was like the biggest thing – and then listening to him, and listening to his life story. Basically seeing his video first, and then seeing the array of videos it caused just from that one thing, and to hear how he speaks and how he thinks. And I was like, "I would like to meet him. If we ever met, we could be friends!" I feel that we really think alike. He was once Catholic; I was once Baptist. But he still knows his shit about the Catholic faith. I still know somewhat about Christianity and the southern Baptist thing; I just can't escape it because that's what I was born into. That right there: him and how he thinks was really what piqued my interest. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Among participants, only Joe and Gregory said that their admiration for Savage motivated them to create a video. That being said, implicit in Jill and Thomas' verbiage was the fact that they find value in Savage's work, value that is easily translatable to a venture like the IGBP, especially among consumers of Savage's work who followed his directive to participate. Akin to how celebrity spokespersons are used in strategic communication campaigns because of their brand equity (Seno & Lukas, 2007; Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2009; Till, 1998), Savage's equity was transferred to the IGBP and explicitly or implicitly led participants to contribute a video.

Participants' camaraderie with their presumed viewers' overall stories or experiences with suicidality, or their camaraderie with the IGBP co-founder Savage, served as motivations for their participation as I have demonstrated. Alongside this camaraderie was participants' desire to rectify past or present voids, which they sought

to do through the creation and dissemination of YouTube videos, as detailed in the next section.

Rectification

In addition to seeing themselves within their presumed viewership, participants spoke of wanting to provide viewers with something that they too could have used while in viewers' current circumstances. In some instances, that took the shape of – and stopped at – a YouTube video; in others, it extended further to participants serving as a role model and potential point of contact for viewers. Participants articulated that their IGBP participation was meant to help potential viewers but that it was also self-serving in multiple capacities. More broadly, some spoke of wanting to change the discourse around LGBTQ issues, and their IGBP participation was something others felt morally and ethically obligated to do because of their LGBTQ community membership. Under the categorization of "rectification," six sub-categories emerged, the first of which centered on participants providing their viewers with what they wished they had.

"Exactly What I Would Have Needed"

Multiple participants proclaimed they could have benefitted from the IGBP during their own adolescence and thus decided to lend their voice to the project. Certainly, the sociopolitical climate for LGBTQ individuals has changed exponentially within the last several decades, yet regardless of age nearly all participants expressed this sentiment either explicitly or implicitly.

Often when reminiscing about their not-too-far-removed childhoods, participants in their early- to mid-twenties commented about the "comfort" and "hope" that something like the IGBP could have provided them while they battled their own internal and external

demons. Gregory asserted that, "the message about It Gets Better is perfect. I think you couldn't say it any better. It does get better," and explained:

> If something like this was going on when I was 14 and younger, struggling with this, I think it would have brought me comfort to have had that kind of thing going on, to have all that support pouring out from people all over the country, all over the world. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

Joe and Andie felt similarly to Gregory despite all three participants' victimization experiences differing drastically from one another. Joe, a frequent victim of verbal and physical abuse from peers and adults alike, declared, "If this was back when I was growing up in school, it would have given me a little bit more hope because I actually felt really hopeless back then" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012). Although Andie's struggle was mostly internal, like Joe she also drew a connection to her own adolescence: "when I heard about the movement, I was like I definitely have to join this because this is exactly what I would have needed when I was their age" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012).

Just three years removed from the time period she described below, the benefit Sam saw from the IGBP pertained to her decision to join the military while DADT was still in effect:

> And if a kid gets to watch that and know that they can go on the same path, then that changes their lives. I wish I could have seen that for myself back then, back before I joined when I was 17. I was young, and I didn't know what I was honestly probably getting myself into at the time, but I just knew I wanted to be in the military. But I wish somebody would've created a video that I could have watched to make me feel better about what I was about to do and what I was going to go through, and the fact that they had overcome that and they're great now. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

Nearly two decades older than Gregory, Joe, Andie, and Sam, Kristin said that "if that had existed when I was younger, it could have really helped me" (L. Phillips,

personal communication, July 23, 2012). Through others' verbiage it became apparent

that they too could have benefitted from having someone reach out to them and tell them

that life would get better in the context of the internal and external homophobia and

victimization to which they were subjected. While not all participants stated directly that

they desired that assurance via a YouTube video or the IGBP specifically, several

described wishing they had had a positive lesbian or gay male role model to help them

through their own initial stages of the coming out process. In turn, they wanted to serve

that function for viewers, as detailed in the next section.

"There Wasn't Anybody That was Like Me That I Could Turn To"

Participants' discussions of role models consisted of two related dimensions: 1)

their desire to have had a role model during their own coming out processes; and 2)

wanting to serve as a role model for others, based on a multitude of factors. For some,

the desire to be a role model was explicitly stated, whereas for others it was implied

through various answers given during the interviews. A common occurrence when

discussing role models was participants' emphasis on mainstream media depictions of

lesbians and gay men of the past and present, particularly *positive* lesbian, bisexual, and

allied female role models and *negative* gay male role models. Not only is this finding

indicative of a clear gender divide, it both aligns (gay men) and deviates from (lesbians)

what LGBTQ media scholars have found in decades of representation research, as

reviewed in Chapter 2. Deb desired to have been so lucky as to have present lesbian

celebrity role models to look up to as well as positive fictional media depictions:

> I think I mentioned in my video growing up in high school, and we didn't have any
> "Queer As Folk" or "The L Word" or Rosie O'Donnell, Ellen - all of those people.
> Half of them weren't born yet, let alone out there being role models! And, so it was
> a very confusing thing for me growing up. I easily, for a number of reasons, could

have committed suicide, and I didn't. Fortunately I had loving people around me, but the thing is, for that time period I just held my confusion and my fear inside myself. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 13, 2012)

Echoing Deb's sentiment, Joe mentioned two of his own pop music idols, Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj, and how they serve as role models for adolescents today. During the interview, a poster of Lady Gaga could be seen hanging on the wall behind him, and Joe also quoted a Lady Gaga lyric at the end of his IGBP video. Despite the fact that some musical artists have long been known to identify as LGBTQ or allies themselves (i.e., k.d. lang, George Michael, Madonna, Boy George, etc.), the frequency with which these role models openly identify as LGBTQ has increased exponentially. To Joe, celebrity role models are important, but it is important for non-celebrities to occupy that space for LGBTQ youth as well, as he aimed to do through his video:

> Younger kids nowadays have much more positive role models, much more people who aren't gay also as well, that tell them that it's OK to be who you are. They have people that show them that, and it's reinforced. I didn't have that growing up, so I am happy to today. Now they have Lady Gaga; they have Nicki Minaj; they have all of these people that are out there telling them that it's OK to be you, and I never had that. I'm not a celebrity, but I can step out there and say, "Hey, I'm a regular, average Joe - who is named Joe - that is gay. I did it, and you can too." (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Participants' sentiments centered on lacking role models while they were adolescents and in turn wanting to serve as a role model for adolescents to fill the void they had, with the exception of Sarah and Dennis. Sarah's IGBP video was narrowly targeted to students currently attending her alma mater and battling institutionalized homophobia just as she had done before. Recalling the internal agony she was in while a collegian and the wisdom she received from a lesbian pastor pertaining to the intersection of sexuality and religion, Sarah articulated a desire to "pay it forward:"

And knowing that when I was at Wheaton, I would have loved to have known that there was anyone else who was gay or anyone else who has made it through Wheaton and survived. And so I think that was one of the main reasons: it's simply because when I was a student, there weren't any people openly speaking truth into that space. Additionally, I had just experienced such space as it relates to holding both my sexuality and my faith together. Because I've experienced that space, I very much wanted the students at Wheaton College to know that it isn't a choice between one and the other and that there is a space. There are people who are practicing Christians who are also gay. So I think because I hadn't been told that in person, and not at Wheaton, I wanted to be able to convey that message to the students at Wheaton as well. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 19, 2012)

Within the sample, Dennis was the only person to state that he came out later in adulthood while in his early thirties. Regardless of this temporal difference, like others he struggled with a lack of role models during his coming out process, specifically gay men who had been married before and had fathered children with their ex-wives. The desolation he felt, in part due to a lack of role models, was a defining factor in Dennis' decision process to film an IGBP video and distribute his e-mail address:

I've only been out for probably about two years now, and so I think those past two years I've been kind of working through my own stuff. I can be public myself, and be authentic to who I really am. And when I was coming out and dealing with all of these issues, there wasn't anybody that I felt was like me - because I used to be married, and I have two kids. So I didn't know anybody personally. I have gay friends, but they were never married and never had any kids. So, there wasn't anybody that was like me that I could turn to, and I wanted to be that person for somebody else. So that is why I wanted to make the video and give out my e-mail address if anybody wanted to contact me, they could. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 5, 2012)

Deb, Joe, Sarah, and Dennis' desire to serve as role models for others through their IGBP videos and beyond was central to their explanations for their IGBP participation. For others, explicitly identifying themselves as a role model either happened later in their decision-making process or after filming altogether. Case in point, Jill talked about not knowing anyone else who was gay while attending her homophobic

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Christian high school and being subjected to verbal harassment from peers and adults

alike. Jill did not explicitly state that her high school experience was a driving element in

her desire to serve as a role model for LGBTQ youth through the IGBP, but rather

explained how she came to view herself as a role model over time:

> I worked with LGBT youth here in Portland – we've done some volunteer work with the organization here and some volunteer work with GLSEN here – but I didn't really think of myself as a role model. I just sort of thought, this is the right thing to do, and then I realized when running for office that there were a lot of the youth in town that were looking to me as a role model. So that's why [Fort Worth City Councilman] Joel [Burn's] video was influential, because I thought win or lose, I need to run for office as out as I can. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 21, 2012)

> Despite having "really never thought of myself as a role model," Kile's choice to

contribute to the project was motivated by representations of gay men he had seen

during childhood as well as his affiliation with the Gay Games as both an athlete and a

board member:

> For me, when I was a kid, when I was in college, all I could see were fairies and drag queens, and I didn't feel that. But I could see that's not who I was, and I was afraid that that's what I had to be to act on the feelings I had…. I'm so deeply involved in the Gay Games, which is a huge positive role-model factory of good people, and that's where I came from when making mine. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 30, 2012)

Lee referenced current media representations of gay men mirroring those he witnessed

during adolescence. Like Kile, seeing a narrow depiction of gay men was traumatic for

Lee because his adolescent same-sex attractions did not align with what and whom he

saw depicted:

> When Glee started and Kurt was the only gay character, he was painful to watch. I cringed because I was like, this character is what everybody thinks gay people are like. And when I was growing up, that sort of effeminate, high-voiced, swishy, caring a lot about your hair and what you dress as - that was what it meant to be gay. And it made it so hard for me to come out and to realize that I was gay

because I thought guys were cute, but I wasn't *that* kind of gay. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 15, 2012)

Savage's call for LGBTQ adults to create hope-filled messages directed toward at-risk LGBTQ youth is an explicit call for adults to serve as YouTube-based role models. Therefore, it was logical to hear many participants wanted to serve as a role model for adolescents, leading them to upload a video. However, how participants arrived at that decision as well as their varying conceptualizations of what a role model should be and why demonstrated that "role model" takes different shapes for everyone. Longing to be a YouTube-based role model for youth was closely aligned with another reason why participants lent their voices to the IGBP: in response to their parents' lack of support and/or in part because of their current roles as parents.

"My Parents are Not Supportive, and It's Like the Big Pink Elephant in the Room"

Some participants explained their desire to contribute to the expanding IGBP corpus was intertwined with how their own parents responded (or continue to respond) to their identification as non-heterosexuals. For example, Abbie and Andie's decisions to record a video was made in part in response to their parents' disapproval, and Abbie described her intentional message distribution on a medium to which her parents did not subscribe:

> I wondered because I posted it on Facebook while my parents don't have Facebook. And whenever I write or post something about the gay realm of things, I always wonder if my parents are going to see it – if one of their friends would share it. So I think that was in the back of my mind. I didn't want to be outrageous, and I didn't want to be even inflammatory, but to also unequivocally say that I was not OK with it. And I was trying to give hope to those kids but also sound like a well-reasoned, upset individual who someone like my parents might take seriously. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 16, 2012)

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Andie's video, which largely served as a monologue of her coming out process, was created at a time when she had not disclosed her lesbianism to her parents. In effect, Andie came out globally before doing so in the confines of her own home, a courageous step she had hoped would bring courage to others:

> I think the decision to tell my coming out story in there was a big one for me because it was going up on the Internet and at that point in time I hadn't come out to my parents. I still haven't come out to one of them, and the other who I told just kind of gave me the, "do you think I am stupid?" thing and then just kind of blew it off and blamed it on my friends. So I don't really know how that is supposed to go, but I will be out of this house soon; it will be nice. So it was really me putting myself out there, and it was me saying, "Hey look, I can be brave." If I can come out on the Internet like this, so can you. You can be yourself, and you shouldn't be afraid to be it. And I am not going to be a hypocrite and not tell you where I came from. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Instead of experiencing parental disapproval all along, Kim suffered the trauma of receiving her mother's initial support when coming out only to be subjected to her mother's and her grandmother's wrath the following day:

> I'm the only child; me and my mom – and what did she do? She followed me into my room because I was upset. I was in the band in high school, and after the game she asked me what was wrong. And I told her I think I'm in love with a woman. I didn't say I was gay because I was confused; I didn't think gay people existed. And maybe I would say that, because I think that's how people feel. They don't know that there are people like them. And she was so nice about it that night; she hugged me and told me I love you no matter what. And then the next day she blew up; she was furious; she was pissed. And my grandma came over and went off on me – and there were so many things after that that were just horrible. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 6, 2012)

The toxic combination of adults' drug abuse and homophobia caused Jordon to leave home altogether:

> I moved out when I was 15. My mom was addicted to methamphetamine, unfortunately, and her boyfriend is kind of homophobic. He wasn't the greatest to me, and so I left. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 6, 2012)

In combination with having survived that trauma and struggling with his own coming out process, Jordon explained how he wanted to offer his support to those not much younger than him because he intimately understood the horrors that some viewers may be going through.

In comparison to Abbie, Andie, Kim, and Jordon's experiences, Dennis' coming out process was much different, yet he was also subjected to parental disapproval upon doing so:

> My former wife has actually been surprisingly supportive. Now she is. She has been, and, especially more recently. My parents, however, are not. And it's like the big pink elephant in the room, and they don't want to talk about it. And if they don't have to talk about it, then it's not real; they don't have to address it. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 5, 2012)

It was precisely this lack of support from his parents and others that drove Dennis to record an IGBP video and offer himself to others as a resource.

Although Sarah did not identify her partner's parental challenges as a motivating factor for her own video creation, implicit in her language was the notion of extending herself to others in a way she had wished both her own and her partner's parents had done. Sarah's partner also attended Wheaton College and grew up in an Evangelical Christian household, which continued to present challenges:

> Similarly from the Evangelical perspective, my partner comes from a very, very conservative household. And it pretty much sucks. Still, even as an adult, it is not necessarily getting better. And so it's hard for me. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 19, 2012)

For others, their own past experiences, coupled with their current status as parents, meant they intimately understood the importance of offering support to youth in crisis and therefore wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to do so. As Kaali asserted:

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It's one of the projects dear to me because I have an 11-year-old, and it's one of the populations that when we talk about them, we advocate for rights, for LGBT rights, but our rights also affect our children. So there's not a lot of talk about our children, and our children oftentimes receive some of the same harassment that LGBT youth may experience as well. So that is something that I try to bring to the forefront as well. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 14, 2012)

Kevin disclosed that being the father of a son in a similar position as a youth who committed suicide around the time of the IGBP's launch served as additional inspiration for him to lend his voice:

It stirred close to home because as I saw it that same week, Raymond Chase, who was a young man, who was a student at Johnson and Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, had also taken his life. And here's why it got up, up, up under my skin: My son Ga'Vel is now 22. My son Ga'Vel at the time was 19. He was a culinary student who was on his way to Johnson and Wales. So I thought, oh my God, that could be my son! (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 18, 2012)

To some extent, participants who referenced a lack of parental support had overcome this void enough to make a video purporting that their own and others' lives "get better." However, for some, the act of making and distributing their messages was done specifically in response to the lack of support they had or continue to receive(d). Hearing that all participants in a suicide-prevention project do not have their parents' support, and because of that strained relationship felt compelled to offer support to others in a similar situation, was consistent with LGBTQ-centric suicidality research: A lack of familial support can have detrimental effects on suicidal youth; support from others can help to fill this chasm (Haas et al., 2011). Coupled with participants' voracity for serving as role models because they lacked their own was their panoptic desire to offer a counter-discourse within the IGBP.

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"Offer This Message That is Contrary to What We Hear"

Participants endeavored to challenge the "it gets better" discourse in two ways, by challenging: 1) the simplicity of the very phrase "it gets better;" and 2) the discourse about the intersections of sexuality and religion or occupation. Each challenge is explored in full below, beginning with how participants took aim at the project's eponymous phrase, "it gets better."

All participants agreed with the sentiment that life improves with age, particularly in comparison to the bullying and harassment they endured during youth, and for the most part, only a handful outwardly challenged the name of the project or the connotation inherent with a project's title. For example, Gregory stated:

> I think things are all over getting better, so I think the project – the message – is dead on. I couldn't have said it better myself. When they were like, "It's called the It Gets Better Project; you should do it!" I was like, "Oh, it does get better. Yeah, I feel it. Yeah, I'm gonna do that. Why wouldn't I want to tell someone it gets better?!" Because it does! (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

However, some participants challenged the ingenuousness of that phrase and used their videos to express these opinions, the most adamant of whom was Lee.

Lee filmed his video with a post-it note attached to his computer screen consisting of three main points he wanted to convey to viewers, the third of which was a direct challenge to the idea of "it gets better" after high school. In the course of the interview, Lee talked about how he was skeptical of the IGBP upon first learning about it and spent several weeks thinking about if and how he would contribute. Lee ultimately decided to participate precisely by challenging its core message:

> I really don't like the "hold your breath; it will get better when you're older" message, and I really feel like "Let's Make it Better" might have been a better name for the overall project. But I was very excited by it, and I also really liked the idea behind high schools aren't inviting a sex columnist, Dan Savage, to go in and

talk to them. And I'm one of the few people that has a platform that I do get invited to high schools and middle schools and even elementary schools to talk, but very few schools do that. So it was an exciting project. And it took me a few months to do mine, but as soon as I saw it I started thinking about well what would mine be. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 15, 2012)

Thomas' experience growing up in rural Iowa differed immensely from Lee's childhood in metropolitan Philadelphia, but he shared Lee's concern about the meaning inherent in the phrase "it gets better." Thomas was not subjected to extensive verbal or physical abuse like others and was of the mindset that one person's story of life improving over time was not equivalent to another's:

> I didn't think it was enough to just say, "Oh hey, I made it through it." Even though I went through some difficulties, I didn't have a really hard childhood growing up, and so I thought it was kind of disingenuous for me to say, "Hey look, I made it! I got this pretty good life. You can have it to!" when I really didn't have it all that terribly hard. And so I thought it was also really important to have some videos on there that said not only did I make it through it, but also here's what I'm going to do to try to make it so that it's better now. When I hear about this stuff, the least I can do is write grumpy letters to people and not put up with this kind of crap. And tell someone who is watching that video that not only did I make it through it, but I'm here to actually try to make your life easier, maybe in some tiny miniscule way. Because it's not as effective to just say, "I made it; it gets better." And then someone who's stuck in the middle of nowhere and who's got no one, whose only connection is through YouTube videos saying, "Well, OK - you made it. How does that help me? What is that going to do to the actual pain that I'm going through right now?" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

Thomas went on to echo Lee's sentiment about making it better by stating:

> While I think the It Gets Better Project is something that's effective, and I think that it's a very useful thing, I really do think that more people need to do stuff where it's like, "And here's how we're going to make it better." (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

Paralleling Lee and Thomas' attempts at transforming the phrase "it gets better" into "let's make it better," Dennis questioned the notion of life only getting better in the future as opposed to the present and asserted, "People need to make specific things, specific steps, to make it better right this minute. Why do we have to wait? Why can't it

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be right now?" When I inquired if he was trying to outline steps in which others could make it better in his video, Dennis explained that, as opposed to Lee, he was not literally outlining a list for others to follow but rather offered himself as a resource for questioning adolescents and adults in need of a confidant. He shared with me how a man on the other side of the world had contacted him for help:

> I think what I did was just say, talk to me personally, and I can work with you, see what we can do for you individually, if anything. The guy in Pakistan: obviously I am not going to be able to do anything for him to change the whole culture in one country, but I can talk to him, I can be an outlet for him, a sounding board. I can offer him the resources I was able to get from the U.S. embassy and that kind of thing. There is only so much I can do, but my specific steps would just to be able to be a reflective listener for people. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 5, 2012)

David reiterated Dennis' sentiment and stated that the project was "not just saying that it gets better, but to say, to be specific, that these are the times and places where it can get better, and it can get better perhaps even right now" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 31, 2012). Whereas Lee, Thomas, Dennis, and David were explicit in wanting to challenge the IGBP rhetoric, Jordon was much more subtle in his discussion of doing so. Having filmed two videos, I asked Jordon what was the catalyst for filming a second video, and his answer was indicative of wanting to counter the vapidity of the "it gets better" discourse by offering concrete examples of *how* it gets better. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Jordon did not take aim at the overarching "it gets better" message among all contributors, but rather focused on those in his age demographic:

> I felt that there's a lot of videos of kids that were around my age, who were 17-18, who would make the video to say it is going to get better but didn't necessarily talk about how it got better. And I felt that by making a second video a year later, or a little over a year later, that it's my way of saying this is where I've come just in the

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last year, and it's gotten better from here. And so I felt that it was like giving proof that it really does get better. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 6, 2012)

All participants described above took it upon themselves to challenge what they considered hyperbole and did so by providing a counter IGBP discourse. While all admitted that their lives had in fact improved when compared to their childhoods, they desired to provide a deeper explanation of how life improved rather than making gross generalizations about time being a cure-all. Lee, Thomas, Dennis, and Jordon offered various ways in which viewers could take steps toward improving their lives in the present, and Dennis and Jordon went one step further by making themselves available to viewers looking to talk.

Exhibiting a narrower focus, others set out to challenge the discourse of sexual orientation and religion intersecting through their IGBP participation. Because LGBTQ identities are frequently (mis)interpreted to be in direct conflict with the teachings of many world religions – particularly Christianity – participants wanted to use the IGBP as a platform for challenging the homophobia , biphobia, and transphobia so prevalent within U.S. culture. Three participants' use of the IGBP to draw positive attention to religion and articulate that LGBTQ-identified individuals can participate in religious activities was congruent with their occupations as clergy.

When watching early IGBP videos, David questioned, "where are the clergy, and where are the Jews?" Not seeing any amongst the IGBP contributors, David took that as an indication to insert himself in the project and change the very dynamic of who created videos. He clearly identified himself as a rabbi in his video and its description, making a strong statement that one can be a person of faith *and* gay simultaneously while drawing connections between the IGBP and his prior work:

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I also had a religious perspective. I actually wrote a whole project for the certificate program at the Pacific School of Religion called "You're Already Blessed," which is a way of saying to people, saying actually to parents and to adults around the world, that we need to get voices, we need to lay down the tapes in children's heads and our own heads that can be in place when people start to abuse and start to teach kids horrible words, that we can actually have told them, "No, you are already blessed. You are blessed in the person you are, you are blessed in the body you have, you are blessed in the desires you feel, you are blessed in the way your body responds to the desires you feel." And that we might as well teach that to kids because otherwise we are going to wait until somebody else teaches them to feel shame. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 31, 2012)

David's quest to prevent shaming is directly aligned with Foucault's (1978) "repressive hypothesis" and discussion of how public discourses "police sex."

As an interfaith minister, Deb was also familiar with the sentiment that anything deviating from heterosexuality was in direct conflict with organized religion. She wanted to challenge this mutual exclusivity endemic in religious rhetoric through her IGBP video, particularly because the project was directed at youth who likely are bombarded with just one side of the argument:

There's a mindset amongst the gay community that I believe – and this can be true for any minority – accepts certain opinions of others that we're less than; we're not of God, blah blah blah, and it's all bullshit; it's all just bullshit. So, I wanted them to hear from somebody who is older – whether that would make a difference or not – that we're good people. We're equal in the eyes of the God of their understanding, however they see that, the creator, ultimate intelligence, whatever. We are not lesser than; we're equal. And we deserve all good things. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 13, 2012)

Challenging a viewpoint expressed in Savage and Miller's video along with many others, Kevin took a stance against the assertion of having to leave one's community in order for improvement:

I didn't like the idea of setting kids up for their environment to change, and I wanted to speak to what scripture says about how we can walk in and change the atmosphere. "You teach people how to treat you" is something that I've always said. So you don't get to come to me and drop the F bomb [faggot] and make me

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feel bad about myself because I don't feel bad about myself; you ain't gonna make me feel bad about myself. You can't call me out of my name if I know my name. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 18, 2012)

Ironically, Kevin contradicted statements included in his video about viewers finding community in a place outside of their current locale. In his video, Kevin proclaimed: "you will find a place where you fit in, in a group where you fit in, in a city where you fit in, and you'll realize that you are just everything you are supposed to be" (Taylor, 2010).

Though not a clergy member, Sarah's Christian faith plays a dominant role in her life, as was made clear in both her video and interview. She has lived most of her life being subjected to hegemonic, anti-gay rhetoric from Evangelical Christians in her family, churches, and schools and in turn struggled extensively when she first experienced same-sex attraction. Sarah created her IGBP video expressly to combat this negative religious rhetoric that she and her fellow college community are bombarded with daily and offer positive messages about the feasibility of living as an openly lesbian Evangelical Christian:

> It's just this unintentional or intentional silence around the presence of LGBT persons at Wheaton such that you begin to believe that you do not exist; there's not a space for you. And it took a long time to recognize, but just recognizing that so many of the comments surrounding homosexuality as it relates to faith just get internalized. Even though on a conscious level or on an intellectual level I wake up and know that that's not how I perceive myself, but because you hear these lies over and over and over again you internalize that. So when I was a senior at Wheaton, I met this lesbian pastor who just basically spoke truth that you can be both gay and Christian, and that you are loved by God. And that is a contrary message to what is often heard in the Evangelical circle. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 19, 2012)

Some of the most severe verbal harassment Joe faced while growing up, and still faces living in Alabama, is religious-based verbiage shrouded in claims of Biblical purity. Joe's character has been attacked mercilessly because he is a Southern, Black, openly-

gay man who was raised Baptist but no longer identifies as Christian. He sought to

challenge the religious discourse not from the position of a person of faith, but rather as

a non-believer. The extent of Joe's trauma runs so deep that he has turned his back on

organized religion altogether, the very act of which David, Deb, Kevin, and Sarah are

trying to prevent viewers from doing:

> I tell people you can't cherry pick things if you're going to be a Christian and believe this. You can't just say, "OK, that, that - but I'm going to condemn you for that." For me personally, I stepped back from that. I was born into a Christian household and family, and I used to go to church and stuff, but after going to church and hearing that stuff I'm not really comfortable. I kind of backed off of Christianity; I just stay to myself, religion-wise. I just kind of backed away because I don't have time for that. I don't want to be part of any faith or anything that the followers feel the need to persecute me when they're supposed to accept everybody. But, it doesn't work like that. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Some of the most passionate exchanges I had involved people of faith and those

who had left the church concerning the ways in which they try to combat negative and

often false claims about the intersection of sexuality and religion. For most, the IGBP

was just another avenue in which they could challenge religious discourse targeted to a

different audience – youth – but on a wider scale than ever before.

In addition to interrogating oversimplified claims of "it gets better" and the

implausibility of religion and LGBTQ identities co-existing, participants used the IGBP as

a mechanism for drawing attention to the U.S. Military. Among the youngest participants

in the sample, Sam sought to verbally and non-verbally challenge viewers' perceptions

of lesbianism and the U.S. Military that years of DADT policy enactment had created:

> I did the video in my fatigues because Don't Ask, Don't Tell did get booted, and I was very happy about that. I joined when it was still in effect, and yes, that did affect my life because I had to hide who I was yet again, which is what I was trying to get away from my entire life. And to go back into that as a choice that I made? It had its ups and downs; I will say that. But I wanted to be in the military. I

wanted to fight for our country, and it was something that I always wanted to do regardless of the fact that I had to hide who I was. I didn't hide who I was the whole time; my close friends did know. But in a large, group setting I pretended to be somebody I wasn't, which sucked. So when they got rid of Don't Ask, Don't Tell I was ecstatic and my friends were ecstatic for me…And so I wanted to make a statement that those days in the army where you had to be somebody you weren't were over, and I wanted to make that clear by being in my uniform when I said what I said and to know that it's OK to be that way. I'm OK; I'm still here. If that message gets out to somebody – a kid who doesn't know what they want to do, and they decide to join the army – then they know that it'll be OK. And I mean there's discrimination everywhere; it doesn't matter what you do. But, it's going away, and people are becoming more accepting, and that goes for the army as well. So, I thought that the video would speak greater volumes than even what I was saying in words if I was in uniform as well. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

As with any form of discourse created, there are always going to be individuals who set out to challenge and/or change it altogether, especially in crowdsourced communication efforts like the IGBP where crowdslapping has come to be a semi-regular occurrence. Jeff Howe, the *Wired* writer to whom the first usage of the term crowdsourcing is often attributed (Brabham, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2012a), defines crowdslapping as "anytime the crowd turns against the crowdsourcer" (Howe, 2006). Case in point, an entire subsection of videos has been uploaded to YouTube under the heading "It doesn't get better" in reaction to the IGBP's core message. Thus, it was expected that some participants would challenge the very rhetoric of the "it gets better" message, yet the myriad ways in which they did so was insightful. Equally insightful is the tension between participants' altruistic and self-serving motivations for IGBP participation, which are explored in the next two sections.

"Something I Felt Morally and Ethically Obligated to Do"

Several participants asserted that their IGBP participation was something they felt compelled to do for a number of reasons. Gregory "felt it was my duty to share my story

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to bring strength and comfort to somebody else that I know was going through what I went through" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012), and Lauren proclaimed, "I just felt like I should do something or say something" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 27, 2012). In a similar vein, Jordon disclosed that:

> [b]ut with all of this happening, gay or not, for this project I felt like something needed to be said, some kind of testimony. And the more that people can hear it and see that it does get better, maybe things like that wouldn't happen to my brother or his friends or people like that. So that was something that I felt morally and ethically obligated to do. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 6, 2012)

In comparison, Sarah spoke more broadly about how she felt "compelled to work in spaces that are at the margins of society" when talking about both her upcoming teaching position in suburban Washington, D.C., and her previous job in Mississippi. As a self-identified Christian lesbian who actively attends two different churches, one of which she described as a "really, really conservative church with people who do not affirm" her and her partner (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 19, 2012), Sarah lives in the margins of her religious and professional communities. Therefore, participating in the IGBP was another way for her to operate in a contested space.

Others recalled being overcome with emotion upon learning about the numerous youth suicides precisely because they had been personally impacted by suicide, as Kristin, who attempted suicide, explained:

> I just wanted to do something; that was the bottom line. It was just so awful that I just wanted to do something. It didn't even matter what; I just felt compelled to do something - and this was something that I could do. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Sam echoed Kristin's sentiment despite never having participated in any other anti-bullying or suicide prevention projects. Sam wanted to do so within the IGBP framework

because she had recently been talking to youth online about the coming out process and had reached a point where she could participate in a suicide prevention campaign without being emotionally overwhelmed with thoughts of her own loss.

For Rafael, who filmed his IGBP video on his 45th birthday, he wanted to ensure that at-risk LGBTQ youth would also experience what it is like to reach their 45th birthdays. He spoke of "marking this day and marking this effort by trying to make sure they [viewers] will hit their own 45th birthdays." Later Rafael proclaimed, "we have the responsibility that we look after our own" in reference to LGBTQ youth (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 23, 2012).

The obligation Kevin felt was tied his to occupational role as a pastor but also had a technological bent to it. As he spoke previously about challenging the discourse that renders Christianity and homosexuality incompatible, Kevin reiterated this sentiment and asserted that LGBTQ individuals had an obligation to ensure that YouTube videos were not all negative:

> [t]o realize that YouTube serves the dual purpose of being both a Google search engine for people and a visual representation, and realizing that it's on us to make sure that gay isn't just the "you're going to hell speeches" from crazy preachers and that it also isn't the naked boys doing inappropriate stuff. That it's got to be an entire culture that also looks like - thank God because of this campaign - this groundswell of voices showing up just in this place of saying, "Hi, I'm just like you, and I want to tell you a story." So it literally, in a matter of weeks, shifted what those suggested videos looked like on the right hand side of YouTube when you put in "gay." (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 18, 2012)

For others, coupled with this obligation was a sense of urgency to record and upload their videos as soon as possible because they viewed it as a matter of life and death. Gregory proclaimed that upon watching his colleagues' IGBP videos, he came to the conclusion that "I have to do it now! I can't let this moment pass me by. It felt like it

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was dated" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012). Kristin and Rafael had

similar experiences in that they filmed their videos almost as soon as they learned about

the IGBP, which for Kristin ended up being at two o'clock in the morning, for Rafael was

in the middle of his workday, and for Kevin was shortly after receiving a memo from the

Trevor Project about a moment of silence for the recent suicide victims. As Kevin

revealed, "it hit me in such a way that I couldn't not act immediately" (L. Phillips, personal

communication, July 18, 2012). Juxtaposing the altruism of those participants referenced

above were the self-serving motivations others disclosed in their interviews.

"I Need to Do This for Me"

The final sub-category that surfaced under the overarching "rectification"

categorization demonstrated that IGBP participation was not purely altruistic for the

benefit of at-risk youth, but rather participants were also motivated to do so for

themselves. By telling a portion of their own stories, participants disclosed that filming a

video was cathartic for them because it provided an avenue to both show support and

gain support and feedback from viewers. As Gregory stated when I was asking him

about his motivations for participation, "I need to do this for me" (L. Phillips, personal

communication, July 24, 2012). Comparatively, Abbie and Lauren acknowledged the

"selfish" and "egotistical" components of their IGBP participation, respectively. Although

Abbie's video contains little in the way of personal information, making a video allowed

her to vent her frustrations about the NC Amendment 1 passage:

> Well I suppose there's always the selfish component to something like this,
> blogging or making a video of this kind, because I was trying to sort through how I
> felt about it. And I like to write or talk my feelings out. So, it was a way to talk it
> out. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 16, 2012)

The encouragement Lauren received from others outside of vlogging drove her to create

a video:

> [p]eople telling me that I'm really good at expressing words and emotions and just taking things with a smile. I guess it's egotistical to say: I know that I have good presence. I get every job I want; I do – even if I don't have the experience. I get what I want. But when people tell you that kind of thing, you feel like you need to do something. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 27, 2012)

Contrasting Gregory, Abbie, and Lauren's explanations, Kevin articulated that he

signed on to the IGBP to pay tribute to those who had recently taken their own lives. As

the only participant in the sample to mention recent suicide victims by name in his video

along with the Trevor Project's call for silence in memoriam, Kevin's video partially a

tribute – but he filmed the video for himself also:

> I'm doing this in honor of the Trevor Project and the five minutes of silence. I'm doing it for these people, and I'm doing it for little me, for younger me who I wished could have seen this video then. The 15- or 11-year-old me who could be watching this now. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 18, 2012)

Indubitably there is an element of catharsis and narcissism in broadcasting

oneself globally via YouTube despite participants' explicit acknowledgement or

ignorance of this fact. The very act of filming yourself is predicated on the belief that you

have something of value to contribute, and in a project intimately tied to the often difficult

and lengthy process of coming out, it is apparent that many participants used the IGBP

to vent in some fashion. Notably, Jill was the only participant to speak out against the

narcissism ingrained within YouTubing:

> I don't think that I am one of the people that just made a video to see myself. I'm someone who also works and spends my time giving to LGBT causes. So I don't think I'm an armchair activist, by any means. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 21, 2012)

In reality, few participants could be labeled "armchair activists" or "slacktivists,"

upon closer inspection of both their professions and broader LGBTQ participation,

though some did speak to the ease of IGBP participation as a motivating factor. Creating

and uploading a YouTube video requires little more than a video camera, Internet

access, a YouTube account, and a few minutes of time. Thus, the IGBP has drawn

contributions from individuals worldwide, including self-described "Luddites" (David) and

the "tech-savvy" (Kristin) alike. As Kaali explained, the fact that the IGBP was YouTube-

based made it easy to lend their voices and imagery to the project. Kaali stated:

> It was very easy; it didn't take a lot of my time. Most amount of time it took was to actually sit down, turn on the camera, take it, and then upload it. So I think all in all, it may have taken 15 minutes. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 14, 2012)

Thomas revealed that the project's format is what converted him from a thinker to a doer:

> I really liked the project. It wasn't this huge project; it was just this very simple "we're going to do one thing," and "we're just going to try to reach out to people who may only have the Internet as a way of connecting with other LGBTQ folks." The simplicity of it really appealed to me, and it came out at the time when there was that rash of LGBTQ youth committing suicide and the series of really publicized suicides – which I just think is absolutely atrocious that we don't have anything to help people; that people get to that stage where they think that's the only way out. So I really felt for that, and I think seeing that and hearing about these suicides I got to the point where it was like, if I could make this video, which doesn't take all that much, and I could upload it to YouTube, and it could get put on this site, and if there's one person that finds it and has one more day or a slightly better life because they saw my video, then that is a good reason to do it. And it's one of those things where you don't feel like you're doing a huge amount, but also it's like the entry to just doing it all is so low that why wouldn't you just do it? So I think that's why I finally went ahead and made one. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

Others explicitly stated that they were active YouTubers, such as Lee and Kevin. Lee

boasted having created over 100 videos for his blog and being well-versed in the format.

Correspondingly, Kevin, a self-described "frequent YouTuber" who uploads his sermons

onto the website, first learned of the IGBP during an afternoon spent browsing videos on the website. Thus, whether participants stated outright that the format was conducive to their participation and was a motivation for them, the sheer fact that they could participate in the IGBP and it was relatively easily to do so implied that the project's format contributed to their motivations.

Whether participants' motivations were more passive (just create a video) or active (i.e., serve as a role model; offer additional contact information; challenge the IGBP discourse), for many, they expressed participating in the IGBP to compensate for what was missing during their own tumultuous coming out processes. Through rectification, participants offered hope to IGBP viewers in ways that were both altruistic and self-serving, and they provided at-risk LGBTQ youth an additional source of support through a new medium. Coinciding with some participants' desires of challenging the IGBP discourse, others were motivated to participate because they did not see themselves – or more pointedly, one or more of their multiple components of their identities – within the IGBP corpus, as illustrated in the next section: Media Representation.

Media Representation

Along with challenging the IGBP rhetoric, participants were motivated to create videos in order to change the non-verbal communication conveyed within the project. Participants explicitly stated that not seeing themselves in the IGBP with regards to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, and geography prompted them to turn on their cameras and record their own messages. Notably absent from this list is class, a key

component of the matrix of domination. Each demographic variable is discussed in turn,

beginning with race.

"Maybe a Sprinkle of People of Color"

When asked why they participated in the IGBP, Kevin, Joe, and Kim all indicated

that their racial identity was a key impetus for their participation. Kevin stated that

"something in it made me address the absence of African American faces," and went on

to note that the intersectionality of his multiple identities pushed him to speak up:

> So it's like all of these things converged in the It Gets Better, and I just saw all the little brown faces who might, like me, go YouTubing and go, "Oh wow, there's a White guy and his partner," or "Oh wow, there's a lady," "Oh wow, there's somebody else," and are thinking, "when will somebody care enough about me to stand up for me?" So I was not going to let the absence of a face like me be the blood on my hands for the little boy who went looking for himself. Because remember, a lot of celebrities jumped onboard, so it wasn't the absence of brown faces per se ... And, I just kept thinking, where is the voice for the young boy like me who's looking to see if somebody cared enough to do a video? That was really important to me because I thought about those two 11-year-old boys and the 19-year-old boy in his dorm and that cocoon of oppression and fear that we can get locked in. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 18, 2012)

Like Kevin, Joe also saw a dearth of Black faces among the panoply of IGBP

contributors, and he was determined to remedy that:

> And that's one thing I wanted people to know because I have seen a lot of faces on YouTube of people who have done the videos, but there's been maybe a sprinkle of people of color. That's another reason why I wanted to do the video because I don't see a lot of people that look like me. And I embrace everyone, but somebody needs to show that there's not just White or Brown or anything, but there are Black people that experience some of the same things that they're going through as well. And I decided I needed to stick my face out there, broadcast that for people. Being a person of color hasn't been easy. I've met other people who are Black that have told me that they've gotten it, but they haven't gotten it worse than I have. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

When I asked Kim if a person's racial identity could serve as a deterrent to participating,

she affirmed and explained that many people of color within her own immediate social

circles would never do so, including an alumnus who reached out to her after she

created an IGBP video as well as an individual close to her that she requested not be

identified in this study, thus the use of --- in her quote below:

> Oh yeah. Someone like --- would never do that; would never make a video. --- only talks about it with me and --- partner. And someone like that alumni who has dealt with some things but is not really ready for the world to know yet would never make a video, and it's sad because these are the voices that might help out. I have a best friend at school who came out to me. He's a black male, and it's really tough. And people who are biracial: when you have a little bit of color, everyone wants to assume you're Black, but you're not. And it's hard for them to make a video about one issue when they're still trying to get over the others. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 6, 2012)

In contrast, race was not a motivating factor for Kaali despite sharing workplace stories

of youth who questioned why they rarely saw people of color like her in leadership

positions. Kaali revealed:

> I can't say that I looked to see how many African Americans or how many studs or Aggressives. I just kind of label myself as gender nonconforming. I never looked to see how many were out there, but I do a lot of trainings, and I train social workers on how to work with LGBT youth. So one of my motivators, as well as just doing it, was saying this is the population that I train people to deal with. So I think it's also good in making a video and telling them, identifying that there are individuals out there and possibly encourage some of them to kind of look at the video or make a video themselves. So I can't say that it [race] really was a motivating factor. I think that it's great to see people from all different backgrounds. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 14, 2012)

Kevin was the only individual of the four to explicitly mention his race during the

course of his video, but Kim, Joe, and Kaali made a point of discussing their racial

identities during the interviews when asked why they contributed to the IGBP. In

contrast, the remaining 16 participants who identified at least in part as White made no

reference to race as a motivating factor, which was not surprising given that most also

did not discuss race in their videos either. As with the MCDA, White privilege seemed to

be at play in participants' descriptions of their motivations for participation (McIntosh,

1988), such that no White-identified participant stated race was a motivating factor.

Alongside race, others noted the impact of ethnicity on motivating them to create a

video.

"It's Such a Hard Thing for the Jewish Community to Accept"

Three participants shared with me that they were at least in part of Jewish

ethnicity, and that ethnicity contributed to their IGBP participation in varying degrees. As

Lauren articulated, it was not her sexuality that first led to others' harassing comments,

but rather her Jewish identity: "I was made fun of for being Jewish before I was made fun

of for being gay." She went on to describe how being gay within the Jewish community

has additional challenges:

> [e]specially in the Jewish community – we're so hard on ourselves. People always say Italian families, Irish families. Every ethnicity has their own, ridiculous similar family issues, which is "we want you to marry and breed." Jews are particularly vicious to their own kind and desperate for their own kind to the point where you are guilted for staying and you are guilted for staying out. And my fiancé goes to therapy to deal with all the shit her parents have put her through over the years. It's just such a hard thing for the Jewish community to accept. It's so weird: they're so accepting about other people when they're gay; it's no big thing. But when it runs in the family, it's different. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 27, 2012)

As referenced previously, David questioned aloud "where are the Jews" when he

started watching IGBP videos and sought to rectify this absence by contributing a video

of his own. Upon my asking him to tell me about himself at the beginning of our

exchange, David divulged that, "My father was a refugee from Nazi Germany, and my

mother was born into a reformed Jewish family in Detroit" (L. Phillips, personal

communication, July 31, 2012). Undeniably, the horrific effects of ethnic cleansing his

father witnessed in conjunction with the verbal and physical abuse David faced during

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his adolescence revealed that David was familiar with prejudice in multiple forms, of which sexual orientation was just one part.

Like David, Deb relayed how her father was discriminated against inside and outside of his own family unit:

> My dad was Jewish and he married my mother who was not, and that created havoc in his family. They buried him. They sat shiva, which is the week-long mourning period in the Jewish faith. So he was done. Now that's pretty prejudicial. They did try reconciliation later.

In addition to his family's internal prejudices, Deb's father experienced external prejudices as well:

> When he went to go looking for a house, the realtor told him there are only two communities "you people" can move to, and he wasn't talking about Lutherans. So, I think the idea, too, to let people know that other people have lived through prejudice, and it's just a matter of people getting over their fears and ignorance. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 13, 2012)

Thus, participants' own experiences in conjunction with their parents' stories familiarized them with the broader landscape of ethnic-based prejudice and discrimination. This understanding, when combined with their own sexual minority status as gay men and lesbians, materialized in participants' desires to share their stories with others, and for some, sexual orientation served as a strong catalyst for their IGBP participation.

"Somebody Who Was Female but Looked Like a Guy"

Beyond race and ethnicity, participants divulged that their gender expression and sexual identities contributed to their global dissemination of personal stories. Looking first at gender, Kristin and Sam strived to offer varying gender expressions within the IGBP. In the project's early stages, Kristin noted that "it was almost all guys" who had uploaded videos (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012), and having attempted suicide as a teenager, she wanted to challenge the notion that gay men alone

are suicidal by offering a lesbian woman's perspective. When I probed her for information about gender as a motivator, she divulged that the IGBP reified (false) claims of a unified LGBTQ community on the basis of gender:

> I feel like gays and lesbians, we have this great front that we show everybody like we are totally united, and we're like, "We're the gay and lesbians!" But aside from Gay Pride, I don't think we hang out very much with each other. And so it's like although I appreciate them and I respect them and I do stuff with them, in terms of my day-to-day life, I have very little interaction with gay men at all. And so these club guys that I saw on the videos are great, but they're not my experience at all. And, so I think it is gender, but it is also a cultural thing between the way gay men are, and again this is a gross generalization, versus the way gay women are – and the age piece. You know, in my 20s I was clubbing and fucking everything I wanted to, and it was a crazy time! It was a great time! But it's very different from how I am now. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

For Sam, she saw her masculine gender expression as a rationale for contributing to the project because other masculine-appearing women – whether lesbian or not – could probably relate to the discrimination she experienced/s precisely because of her gender non-conforming appearance:

> So everybody goes on there looking for a different video. And honestly, if I was a kid and I needed help, I would probably look to someone who looked like me because I think they would be going through the same thing. I would look for somebody who was female but looked like a guy because I would think that they would have the same issues that I would. Sometimes I can't go in public restrooms. I think they have dealt with that before because that sucks, but I bet they have. And I would want to watch someone who felt how I felt about things and who has been through what I have been through. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

For others, their sexual identities drove them to participate. Labeling herself a lesbian demisexual, which Andie defined is a person "unable to be physically intimate with somebody unless having the emotional foundation of a relationship first," Andie explained that by putting herself "out there" her story could potentially resonate with

youth who do not necessarily feel suicidal but rather are confused by their sexual

feelings:

> That was important to me. I wasn't exactly aware of it at that point; I was calling myself a pansexual because I didn't even know of the term demisexual. So it was more important for me to show that part of it and to show even if you're not going through the physical bullying, even if you're not feeling the need to kill yourself, you're still detaching yourself from things emotionally, and that's still damaging. If you don't put yourself out there, you'll never find somebody else who is like you. So maybe there is somebody out there like me who only wants to not be themselves anymore, really wants to get rid of themselves, but doesn't want to kill themselves, and then is lesbian demisexual, and then just sees this video. And everything is good again because somebody out there is exactly like her or them. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

> Joe wanted to challenge the limited expression of how gay men are commonly

depicted within mainstream media by proffering himself to the IGBP tapestry:

> I think it can bridge gaps too amongst people who are homophobic as well as you can see that gay people themselves are not caricatures - the ones you see on television or what your friends say, what your church says, what your mom says, or anybody in the family. We're just like all people, just like everybody else. And we don't like the same things you like, and that's true for all human beings; we don't like the same things. I think that project itself is really, really helpful. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

He went on to describe how nearly all of the sparse depictions of Black gay men in

television and film are extreme stereotypes, such as fictional characters Noah and Ricky

from the television series *Noah's Arc,* and Chris Tucker's portrayal of Rudy Rhod in the

film *The Fifth Element*.

Paralleling Joe's discussion above, Rafael asserted that the IGBP benefitted from

displaying a wide variety of body images, including "husky bear types" like him.

Embedded within Joe's discussion of gay male caricatures in the media is representation

of gay men as physically fit and statuesque, a stereotype that gay media itself has

largely perpetuated (Gross, 2001; Phillips, 2012; Saucier & Caron, 2008; Sender, 2004; Streitmatter, 2009). To combat this imagery, Rafael inserted himself into the IGBP fabric:

> I think people want every day folks that look like they're not these skinny Abercrombie model types; maybe they're more the husky bear types. So I think that it was important that there be somebody that you identify with them as part of the project; that it's not all the same body or age or race or whatever archetype… I wanted to make sure that there might be somebody out there that looked like me, identified with people like me, or inspired to be people like me – or was interested in people like me. That could happen as well! (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 23, 2012)

In conjunction with race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, age was another motivator, as Kristin referenced above and others discussed in greater detail.

"I Wanted to Talk From a More Distant Perspective"

To reiterate, participants within the sample tended to skew younger: nine were in their twenties; three in their thirties; five in their forties; one in his fifties; and two in their sixties. Both participants who were 60 years or older commented about age as a determining factor in their taking part in the project, first illustrated by Kile's comment: "I saw a lot of young people, people under 30 in the It Gets Better, but I just wanted to talk from a more distant perspective" (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 30, 2012). Deb expressed similar sentiment through articulating a familial backstory for why age was an impetus for her participation:

> Traditionally, in my grandmother's society, the grandparents raised the babies while the parents were out taking care of the household, so there's not a separation in generations. I think it's particularly important for people to - at any age - reach out. If there is something wrong with the youth today, then we've failed somehow. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 13, 2012)

The importance of having a diversity of voices and faces within the IGBP manifested in participants' motivations to show viewers people like themselves. Additionally, the geographic location in which participants grew up and came out also

played a role in their wanting to reach out to suicidal LGBTQ youth, as described in the next section.

"People Carry a Bible *Under Their Arms and a Whiskey in the Other Hand"*

Of those who mentioned where they spent their childhoods, and the impact that locale had on their own process of sexual self-acceptance, more than half were from the South, specifically Virginia, South Carolina, and Alabama. Living in the South was negatively associated with their acceptance by family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers alike. Born and raised in the Deep South, Joe voiced his hatred of Alabama:

> This is the Bible Belt, and I live in the buckle of the Bible Belt. And people carry a *Bible* under their arms and a whiskey in the other hand. That's just how it is… I hated Alabama; I still hate it. It has been a thorn in my back. I've been to other states as well, and it's a completely different atmosphere. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Joe compared his experiences of living in Alabama for most of his life with the brief time he spent living in New York City with an ex-boyfriend, stating the gross differences in how he was treated on account of his sexual orientation. According to Joe, race, sexual orientation, and religion were intimately interwoven with his geographic locale, all of which he made clear were contributing factors to his participation.

Kim echoed Joe's sentiment about the challenges she experienced while growing up in the south. After being berated by her mother and grandmother for disclosing her lesbianism, Kim knew that trauma – in combination with her need to be surrounded by more diverse people – necessitated that she leave her home state as soon as possible. Kim's acceptance of a full ROTC scholarship to attend The College of William & Mary in Virginia was her ticket out of South Carolina:

> [s]ometimes I found hope in my dreams, my future, and the possibility of coming two states away to go to college or wherever. It made me work harder, and that's

how I got to where I am now…. I did not want to stay there at all. I didn't even want to apply to in-state schools. And I just knew I had to get out, had to get away; it was too slow for me. I wanted to meet different people. My high school was majority African American. The most racial diversity was in teachers. I had been to a program before my senior year in high school called Palmetto Girl State. I was chosen as one of two girls to represent the state in D.C. There were girls from all over the United States, and I was like, there is no way I am staying in South Carolina. So I applied to 15 schools, and that was my motivation throughout senior year: I was going away. I didn't know where, but it will be good – and I did. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 6, 2012)

Coincidentally, Abbie was raised just a couple hours west of where Kim escaped to but was now attending a very liberal college in Massachusetts. Growing up in a conservative Virginian city allowed Abbie to relate to how North Carolinian youth likely felt when conservative politicians put their future marriage rights up for vote:

I was trying to imagine what it would be like for these teenagers, these kids in North Carolina, and how hard it would be for them because I'm also from a pretty conservative area, and my own parents don't really approve of the whole thing. So, I was feeling for them and trying to put out a message for them to give them some hope. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 16, 2012)

The west coast is commonly thought of as more liberal than the South on many fronts, especially with regards to sexual orientation, but Kristin and Jordon's experiences of growing up in California and Washington, respectively, ran counter to these political leanings. In the course of our interview, Kristin disclosed she had experienced several instances of sexual orientation-based discrimination while living in the San Francisco Bay Area throughout her adulthood, and during her childhood she was not even privy to the language of sexual orientation:

I grew up in a really small town, and I honestly don't even think I heard the word lesbian until college – seriously. OK, so this is going to sound nuts, but you're supposed to be with a guy, right? That's what you do: you marry a boy, you and the boy have babies, you get married. And so it just never occurred to me that I didn't have to… And I grew up Catholic, so somehow I managed to know that "it" was wrong even though I didn't know what "it" was. But when I got to college, it

wasn't until my last year that I finally got the courage to do something about it. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Kristin explained further:

> I grew up in California; it's kind of like the "gay front." California is the land of fruits and nuts. That is bullshit, especially in the rural towns: Prop 8 passed and 22. So twice gay marriage has gone down here. So it may be that like in the big areas – San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Jose – that we're more liberal, but go anywhere outside of the big city and within the big city too (shakes head no)… (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Jordon had a similar experience growing up in a small, coastal Washingtonian town. In conjunction with a small-town mentality related to homosexuality, within the past several years Jordon's hometown has had an unusually high number of youth suicides, and his location drove him to speak out.

Undeniably, the impact that their geographic locations had on their own sexual identity development compelled many participants to vacate these locales once they reached adulthood and had the financial means to do so, as Kim, Abbie, Jordon, and Thomas had done, but furthermore to want to share their survival experiences with other LGBTQ youth. Coupled with mentions of their childhood hometowns were mentions of participants' current environments, and the juxtaposition of both locales offered additional insight into their motivations for participation.

With the exception of a handful of participants, most no longer resided in the locale in which they were born or raised, which was also a contributing factor for some to participate in the IGBP, particularly those away at college (Abbie, Gregory, and Kim), physically removed from their homophobic college (Sarah), or now living in gay-friendly cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, or New York. In juxtaposing her conservative

Virginian hometown with her current liberal collegiate residence in Massachusetts, Abbie

explained that her current location was an impetus for her foray into vlogging:

> Well, the simple answer is that Amendment 1 was big in the news, and I went to a very liberal college. So there were a lot of people upset about it, and so it's very relevant. And I was lying in bed at night and feeling angry about it, writing down my thoughts, and then the next day I decided I would make a video because I have been blogging. And I felt like a video would be more effective than just writing the words down. I was familiar with the It Gets Better Campaign, so that was an inspiration as well. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 16, 2012)

As part of campus communities that had created their own IGBP collaborations,

Kim and Gregory's current locations in Virginia and Massachusetts, respectively, were

also guiding forces in their participation. Gregory elaborated further that by living on

campus he was more attuned to what was going on within the Simmons community, and

the implication is that his locale led him to feel even more compelled to participate:

> Well, I'm a graduate student in the Simmons College School of Social Work, and Simmons decided to launch their own It Gets Better Project. I heard actually through a friend of mine that also goes to Simmons who was like, "Oh, they're doing an It Gets Better Project just with Simmons, you should do it." And I watched a couple of people's videos, and I was so moved, and I was like, "Oh, I have to do this! I think this would be excellent." And I live on campus too. I feel like when you live on campus you are more up on what the heck's going on around campus. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

Rather than being affiliated with a liberal college community, Sarah had since

graduated from Illinois-based, socially conservative Wheaton College and now lived in

metropolitan Washington D.C. It was her absence from her college community that drove

her to contribute an IGBP video, and Andie's current environment was analogous to

Sarah's. As opposed to living on a college campus, Andie lived at home with her

homophobic parents while commuting to school and looked forward to the day when she

would be out from under their roof. The hostility of Andie's current environment drove her

to record an IGBP video but in the safety of her girlfriend's parents' house.

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No longer collegians themselves, David, Kile, and Lee all divulged living in gay-friendly Californian cities at the time of their IGBP filming. None were native Californians, and throughout the course of their interviews, each revealed that they exist in very queer worlds. As David explained when asked about the LGBTQ-specific media he consumes:

> I just feel surrounded by it, so I don't even know anymore. I live in such a queer world right now that it's only probably when I am away from it that I notice, where's my daily dose of queerness? (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 31, 2012)

Living in a queer-supportive environment, or in Andie's case, being able to escape to one, contributed to participants' desires to reach out to at-risk LGBTQ kids who may not have the luxury of experiencing gay-friendly spaces.

While participants' desires to change aspects of IGBP media representation differed, their strategies were the same: be the visual diversity that they wished to see included in the user-generated project. Changing mainstream media depictions of lesbians and gay men will likely take time despite significant advancements in the past two decades (Streitmatter, 2009), but through YouTube, participants had the tools to change the media landscape immediately – and several took advantage of their ability to do so. Extending beyond participants' camaraderie with viewers and their desire for rectification or changing the IGBP media landscape, their positionality emerged from the data as the final categorization, explained below.

Positionality

Under positionality, two sub-categories emerged, specifically participants' personality traits as leaders and their current pride in being gay or lesbian, which are discussed in succession.

"Always Been More of a Leader Than a Follower"

Running in parallel to their desires to serve as role models, Joe, Kaali, and Deb explained how their participation in the IGBP was not out of the ordinary based on their personalities as trailblazers. When I asked Joe to tell me about himself, he informed me that he has "always been more of a leader than a follower" and had recently graduated from college as a path-forger within Latin American Studies:

> There are not many black people in my major either; everybody else was Hispanic or White or Asian. So I was like, "Hey, I can show them!," because I'm always doing things that are against the grain. I'm very different from everybody else. So I do things, and people are like, "Oh, OK." And now, since I left school, a lot of people of color have now decided they wanted to do my major. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Therefore, Joe saw his video contribution as merely an extension of his natural inclination to be a leader. In lending his voice and image to the IGBP, Joe had hoped that he could serve as an inspiration for other Black people to follow in his lead, just as he has done as an undergraduate student.

Kaali did not desire to be a role model in convincing other Black individuals to contribute IGBP videos, but she shared Joe's leadership trait and explained that her participation was not anything out of the ordinary:

> I'm always looking at how to make a difference. I can say that I've been pretty successful at being who I am and being very vocal about who I am and being able to be my authentic self. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 14, 2012)

Stating an explicit desire to be a role model, Deb also explained how she, like Joe, hoped that her story could inspire others to participate in the project. Seeing herself as a peacemaker in multiple aspects of her life, Deb disclosed:

> I've tried, to the best of my ability, to if I see a wrong, and I know what's right, I become just as much a part of that wrong as anybody else. I get in there, and I try to do something to the best of my ability, to make a difference, and then at least

I've done that. And it makes it easier for the next person to jump in and make a difference. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 13, 2012)

Deb's leadership position as an Interfaith minister naturally lends itself to wanting to help others, and the same was true for several participants as well: their occupational roles and volunteer work for social change were directly tied to their desire for IGBP participation. Coinciding with participants' leadership positions was their gay or lesbian pride, something that took most of them years to develop, as detailed below.

"I'm Proud of Being Gay, But it Took Me a Long Time to Get Here"

For most participants, their coming out processes lasted several years because of extensive internalized homophobia, regardless of whether others were supportive of their gay or lesbian identification. Because they all know firsthand what it is like to struggle with questions of sexuality and take those initial steps towards coming out, several participants expressed wanting to share their experiences with youth and be a source of support during that stage of identity development. As Andie described in both her video and interview, she went into denial about her lesbianism for years:

> So when I was trying to accept who I was, or even start to begin to realize who I was, I went into such denial that it was hard for me to accept. So understand it was like I kind of shut off every part of myself, and I was no longer who I was; it was almost like you're emotionally stopping your life. It is very difficult to describe honestly, but I understand the place where they are. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 25, 2012)

Andie was not subjected to verbal or physical abuse as was Lee, but their commonality of sexuality struggles drove both to share their stories. When asked about the target audience for his video, Lee responded that he had a younger version of himself in mind as well as those presently in a mental state he once was in:

> [w]hat I always go back to is, if I as a teenager had watched my video as a teenager; had read my blog; if I as a teenager had had me come to my school to present – what would the impact of that had been? And I always feel like any of it

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would have been life changing in a positive way. It was not easy for me coming out, and it took a ridiculously long time. So, I feel like that's really the criteria that I used. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 15, 2012)

In a similar vein, Sam's coming out process was neither easy nor quick, and it was precisely because of the challenges she overcame on her path to sexual self-identity that Sam wanted to film a video:

> I'm proud of being gay - it took me a long time to get here - but I'm proud of it now. And I want to help kids who are questioning themselves or how they feel. That way, maybe I can make them feel better about the process because it is a process, and it's a process that goes on for a lifetime. That is hard to deal with if you feel alone in it. (L. Phillips, personal communication, July 24, 2012)

Despite the love and support of numerous family members, Kaali alluded to struggling while first coming out, as she compared her experience decades ago to the sociopolitical and cultural environments in which youth come out today. The hurdles Kaali overcame had a lasting impact on her:

> I have a loving family; I have supportive parents, but things were different when I first came out versus now. I think there's more acceptance, more awareness. We're still not at the point of all inclusiveness, but it's better. And so when I was younger I had more perspective of, this is how things were, and now as I am older things actually are better. Things are better than what they were when I was younger. Had I given up during that time, then I would have never known what was down the road: that it actually does get better. And I think that was one of the things for me about the It Gets Better Project is that kids really needed to know that there are others out there that may have gone through some of the things - or may not have - that you went through as a child. However, as an adult, things have changed. There's still a lot of the persecution that takes place, but we learn how to handle it differently; we learn how to defend ourselves differently. (L. Phillips, personal communication, August 14, 2012)

The coming out process is intimately intertwined with the IGBP because participants presume viewers are either struggling with their sexual orientation ("identity confusion") (Cass, 1984) or already identifying as LGBTQ but likely are not out and proud. Akin to serving as role models, participants' displays of sexual orientation-based

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pride were intended to offer viewers hope, now and in the future, while also functioning as motivations for their IGBP participation.

The Matrix of Domination and Production of the IGBP Videos

As Collins (2000) explained, individuals belong to multiple groups and have multifaceted, intersecting identities. Depending upon the situation, one group membership – or demographic variable – may become more salient than others at that point in time, and both unique individual and group standpoints exist. Regarding RQ#2 and motivations for participation, for most participants the salience of their sexual orientation and membership in a broader LGBTQ community took precedence over other facets of their identities, which ultimately drew them to the IGBP and led them to participate.

Throughout the interviews, participants talked about their intersecting identities as tied to sexual orientation and race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, and geography, although class was rarely discussed in any capacity as a motivating factor. The impact of these identities emerged from the data explicitly within one of the four main categorizations, media representation, which included participants' desires to challenge mainstream media representations (and stereotypes) as well as to change the IGBP discourse; the latter was done by participants' contributing their own videos taking aim at the eponymous project and its simplistic, one-size-fits-all message. Participants' desire to change the media (a structural institution) and the hegemonic discourses that it (re)produces pertaining to sexual orientation was in reaction to the matrix of domination that they found themselves within. For racial minorities, ethnic minorities, gender minorities, those 60 years of age or older, and religious minorities (out gay male and

lesbian Christians), it was a matter of both countering what few stereotypes existed as well as seeking inclusion within LGBTQ-related media.

The impact of structural and disciplinary institutions extending beyond the media also emerged from the data as additional factors driving participants to share their stories. For example, participants discussed how their own experiences of getting bullied and/or experiencing sexism and homophobia in schools, churches, the military, and other community institutions (structural) by teachers, administrators, and other adults in positions of power (disciplinary) led to a sense of camaraderie with the IGBP target audience and a desire for rectification of past and present voids. Alongside structural and disciplinary institutions, participants also discussed how their family members (parents), peers, fellow church members, colleagues, etc. were oppressive interpersonally, through driving participants so far as to ideate or attempt suicide, neglecting to serve as role models at a key time in participants' identity development, and directly contributing to the internalized homophobia participants felt through others' hegemonic discourses that for some lasted several years.

The intersectionality of participants' identities and the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal oppressions they experience(d) within the matrix of domination impacted participants to varying degrees in terms of their motivations for IGBP participation, as to be expected. However, among almost all participants who identified as Black/African American (with the exclusion of Kaali), the impact of the matrix of domination appeared to be a *stronger* motivator than those identifying solely or in part as White. Interestingly, although Joe and Kim talked extensively about their intersecting identities and the matrix of domination, neither one discussed their racial,

class, or gender identities in much detail within their videos, instead opting to focus almost exclusively on sexual orientation, which they did implicitly. Therefore, the impact of the matrix of domination on participants could not be determined exclusively from their video content, rendering the interviews an essential component of this research process.

After explaining in-depth the four categorizations that emerged from participants' motivations for IGBP participation (camaraderie; rectification; media representation; and positionality) and the various sub-categorizations that emerged within, in the concluding chapter I offer broader conclusions from this study, study limitations, and my recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

This chapter is structured around three areas: 1) what can be concluded from the combined MCDA and interview data pertaining to RQs #1 and #2 and the matrix of domination; 2) why this multi-method study matters and its implications; and 3) where researchers should go next. Each area is addressed in turn.

MCDA Data, Interview Data, and The Matrix of Domination

As I explicated at the end of Chapters 4 and 5, both the MCDA and interview data revealed connections to the matrix of domination within: 1) the sample of participants gathered for this study; 2) the IGBP video content; and 3) the production of the IGBP videos. Prior to data collection, news coverage of and bloggers' reactions to Savage and Miller's development of the IGBP as an anti-bullying, suicide prevention space targeting LGBTQ youth demonstrated ties between the social media project and the matrix of domination. Each of these four components is addressed in turn, beginning with the latter.

The IGBP is one component of a larger, global media environment that Collins (2000) categorized as a structural institution with the matrix of domination. Savage and Miller developed the IGBP in response to other structural institutions in which homophobia, sexism, and heterosexism prevail, including but not limited to schools, churches, and the government as well as the disciplinary factions within each of these bureaucracies. In fact, Savage's decision to house the IGBP on YouTube was in direct opposition to the very structural institutions from which he would not be granted entrance

to speak with at-risk LGBTQ youth. Positioned as a crowdsourced, social media-based attempt at countering hegemonic discourses about LGBTQ individuals broadly and bullying, harassment, and suicide more narrowly, the IGBP serves to intervene in the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains in which LGBTQ and questioning youth are victimized. Not only do Savage's own words (through IGBP media coverage) support the existence of the matrix of domination as related to why the IGBP was created, but more specifically the matrix's impact emerged within this study's sample, IGBP video content, and production as well.

In brief, the sample gathered for this study skewed White and middle class status or higher. While I did not have access to individuals who opted *not* to take my survey and/or participate in this study, my hunch is that there are multiple reasons why the sample was comprised as such, which may be directly tied to the composition of the IGBP more broadly and deserves further attention. Nonetheless, participants who identified as Black/African American within my study did reveal that their racial identity would likely serve as a deterrent for other Black/African American-identified individuals to participate in the IGBP and subsequently an academic study about it.

Collectively, the MCDA of IGBP videos answered RQ#1 and revealed how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are (re)produced in new media through YouTube videos in ways similar to traditional media. Participants presented a pared-back version of each element of their own identities, projected their identities on their viewers, and created and perpetuated myths through their narratives when discussing themselves and their presumed viewership. For example, participants rarely discussed their own racial identities within their videos through either verbal or non-verbal communication,

and those who did tended to be Black – indicative of the presence of White privilege within the IGBP such that White participants did not openly acknowledge their own racial identities, but neither did those who identified as multiracial. When discussing class, participants did so while largely ignoring their own class privilege as it pertained to their levels of education (nearly all were college educated), occupations (all were gainfully employed or attending school full-time), financial status, or relationship and/or parenting statuses (half were partnered; one quarter had children). With the exception of a few participants, gender was presented and discussed as a binary, with minimal explicit acknowledgement of gender non-conformity, varying gender expressions, or differences in gender identities, despite two self-identified genderqueer individuals within the sample and passing mentions of transgender identities. Moreover, participants' communication of sexual orientation focused almost exclusively on gay or lesbian sexual identities, to the exclusion of those who are questioning their identities (with same-sex attractions), engaging in same-sex behavior, and/or choosing not adopt a lesbian or gay identity but are "queer" in some capacity. Gay and lesbian sexual identities were normalized in the sample with minimal variation among what was presented, and little if anything in participants' verbal and non-verbal communication could be construed as queer.

In conjunction with the communication of their own racial, class, gender, and sexual identities, participants made numerous assumptions about their viewership's racial (largely presumed to be White); class (middle class or higher, or class mobile if not already at that level; will be attending college; will be professionals); gender (situated on one end of the gender binary as distinctly male or female); or sexual identities (largely presumed to be lesbian or gay like the participants themselves). Overwhelmingly,

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viewers were presumed to be youth, as a function of news coverage of suicidal youths and Savage's directives to LGBTQ adults to create messages of hope targeted at suicidal LGBTQ youth, but both the viewership and the producers of those videos cut across all preconceived lines. Furthermore, although participants presumed viewers to have an LGBTQ identity, some percentage – if not the majority – are likely *questioning* their sexual identity and have not and perhaps will not adopt the LGBTQ moniker. Therefore, participants' verbiage is exclusive as it serves to discount those outside of lesbian or gay identities first and foremost, and to some participants trans identities more broadly, such that "it gets better" for those who actively adopt an LGBTQ identity.

The user-generated IGBP challenges structural institution's (i.e., mainstream media's) narrow depiction of LGBTQ individuals that tend to center on White, cisgendered gay men of middle class status or higher, challenges hegemonic rhetoric endemic within the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal components of the matrix of domination, and presents an opportunity for far greater media diversity than ever seen before and includes global depictions of LGBTQ individuals. In many ways, more diversity exists within this sample of 20 individuals than in mainstream media depictions of LGBTQ individuals where race, class, and gender are considered, and at times participants discussed intersecting identities and the matrix of domination outright as compared to these theoretical frameworks rarely being acknowledged within mainstream media. Nonetheless, within this IGBP representation certain identities are presented to the exclusion of others, potentially leaving viewers who fall outside of these artificially-contrived boundaries even more isolated, at risk for being even more suicidal because once again they do not fit in, and also confused about what identities (gender, sexual,

and beyond) are even possible. Therefore, the IGBP videos both challenge the matrix of domination and effectively reify its very existence.

Tied to the phrase "it gets better" is the need for unpacking for whom, what, where, when, why, and how does it get better, all of which emerged through the videos. According to this sample, life gets better for individuals who are more likely than not partnered, White, middle class status or higher (college educated professionals), gender-conforming, self-identified gay men or lesbians. Any identities falling outside of these boundaries are either mentioned in passing (i.e., multiracial; working class; "same-sex loving, gender non-conforming female;" transgender; etc.) or more commonly ignored altogether, such as the racial identities beyond the Black/White dichotomy, class levels below middle class, and any gender and sexual identities that do not fit neatly within a gender binary or the LGBTQ acronym. Viewers are told that life improves through: 1) the completion of and their subsequent physical removal from hostile K-12 school, religious, or home environments (structural) and the bullies who are temporally and spatially confined to these spaces (disciplinary and interpersonal); 2) finding a partner for a traditional, monogamous coupling that will result in a heteronormative marriage and the desire *and* resources to raise children; and 3) building community with like-minded others outside of one's hometown in an LGBTQ-friendly space, at a future date and time. LGBTQ and questioning youths' lives will improve because sexual and gender identity-based bullying is endemic to the growing up process and is something that all who identify as LGBTQ simply overcome with the passage of time on their path to adulthood; little consideration is given to the fact that some viewers struggling with their sexual identities are already adults or that one's intersecting identities directly impacts many

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opportunities that she/he/ze has that would make life better (financial, intellectual, and social capital).

Just as the IGBP video content needs to be problematized because of its overall narrow focus on what is represented and presumption of whom that content is being presented to, consideration must be given for which identities are privileged over others. In the IGBP, sexual orientation is front and center, at times to the exclusion of or minimization of other identities (race, class, and gender). Because one's sexual identity cannot be separated from their other identities when trying to comprehend the complexity of oppression, IGBP participants' forefronting of one identity over another – or ignorance of others' identities – is troublesome and runs counter to the systematic organization of oppression (Collins, 2009). Moreover, through the limited expressions and media representations of identity, IGBP participants run the risk of further contributing to the stereotypical, narrow media depictions of LGBTQ individuals, doing so simply through a new medium, and may limit what identities questioning youth and adults think are possible. For LGBTQ or questioning individuals, particularly those at-risk for suicide ideation, planning, attempts, or completion, these identities are often drawn in part from the media. As Gross (2001) asserted,

> In the absence of adequate information in their immediate environment, most people – gay or straight – have little choice but to accept the media stereotypes they imagine must be typical of all lesbians and gay men. (p. 16)

Thus, the IGBP videos function as another cog in the broader system of structural (media) oppression, one of the very oppressions that the IGBP intends to fight.

In discussing their motivations for IGBP participation, participants stated feeling a sense of camaraderie with at-risk LGBTQ and questioning youth; an urge to rectify what

was missing from their own experiences related to sexual identity development; the need to alter the media representation of lesbian and gay men in – and through – the IGBP; and the impact of their own current positionality. Participants were forthcoming about the intersectionality of their identities as they pertain to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, and geography, and subsequently how these identities led them to participate in the IGBP, but at times this same acknowledgement and discussion of intersectionality failed to emerge in the videos despite its vital importance for viewers. Case in point, both Joe and Kim discussed the impact of their racial, gender, sexual, and geographic identities as motivators for IGBP participation, but the depth and breadth of these intersections went largely unexplored in the explicit content of their videos. While mere inclusion of Joe and Kim's Southern, lower class Black, gay male and genderqueer lesbian identities is significant progress for LGBTQ media representation, both missed an opportunity for explaining how this intersectionality has impacted their lives – and will for their viewers, too.

Moreover, participants identified the myriad structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal oppressions that had impacted their own lives and drove them to participate in the IGBP, some of which were expressed in the videos to the exclusion of others. For example, in discussing their victimization within schools, churches, and other community organizations by family members, peers, teachers, coaches, administrators, and other adults in positions of power, participants identified structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal oppressions of which they sought to rectify through their IGBP participation. While all participants' intentions were well-meaning, the extent to which the matrix of domination was challenged through their video content varied

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greatly, and across the board participants' interviews revealed the matrix of domination's impact in their lives was far greater in leading them to participate than in *what* they said in their videos.

In sum, this study illustrates the impact of the matrix of domination on the development, content, and production of a globally crowdsourced, social media-based project representative of "a new kind of activism" (Mongillo, 2010) as well as the sample gathered. Moreover, the study has theoretical, methodological, and practical implications as discussed in the next section.

Implications

As with any study, this one is to be subjected to the question, "Why does this matter?" The value of this study lies in not just what it says about the IGBP and the matrix of domination, but furthermore its methodological, theoretical, and practical implications discussed below.

Methodological Implications

The extension of CDA into MCDA is a relatively new development within discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012), as are the application of MCDA to YouTube videos and the combining of MCDA and in-depth interviews in a multi-method research design. Moreover, while interviewing is among the oldest known research methods in existence, the use of video chat for conducting interviews is a recent technological and methodological development.

The vast majority of CDA research conducted continues to examine text alone without an equal emphasis placed on the verbal and non-verbal information communicated. Given the proliferation of visual-based communications, often critical

discourse analysts' reliance upon words alone is often insufficient in understanding the meaning of discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012), particularly if analysts seek to *intervene* on the power structures inherent within it. At the time of writing, few MCDA studies were found pertaining to strategic communication broadly (Hansen & Machin, 2008; Machin & Niblock, 2008; Makoni, 2012) or that had employed YouTube videos as a data source more narrowly (Tolson, 2010). Furthermore, no published MCDA studies concerning suicidality and its precursors, LGBTQ media representation, or online participatory culture, were found, rendering this study to be among the first conducted.

Not only have scholars become increasing critical of CDA research that does not adequately account for non-verbal communication, but furthermore MCDA research that does not consider discourse production is increasingly viewed by some as being of limited value (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In the Web 2.0 era, a growing portion (but certainly not all) of the content that could be subjected to CDA exists on the Internet, and researchers have increasing accessibility to content producers. Many content producers have transformed from consumers alone into consumers *and* producers, in conjunction with the widespread availability of tools for researchers to access their content and make contact with producers (i.e., through social media, etc.). In solely relying upon producers' content to speak for itself without allowing producers to speak about and probing them for additional information about the how or why behind that content, researchers are left pontificating about how consumers receive that messaging and producers' intentions in creating it. As the barriers to accessing media producers are lessened, critical research is made stronger expressly through gathering data about *all* steps of the media process: production, content, and consumption. Interviews provide a way to bridge this proverbial

knowledge gap between content and production and can serve to strengthen research findings, as was illustrated in this study pertaining to the matrix of domination.

Interviewing approaches have changed alongside technological advancements such that Internet-based content producers can discuss their creations with researchers in an environment simulating where and how the original content was produced. Case in point, I used the Internet to interview people nationwide in what is a small but growing area of interview research: video chat-based interviewing. To obtain this sample, I used numerous (Internet-based) social media tools. Thus, this study contributes methodological knowledge in terms of how it was conducted and the tools used to do so that can be replicated by scholars interested in topical areas extending far beyond LGBTQ strategic communication.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical concept of intersectionality is slowly gaining traction in strategic communication research (Gill, 2009; Rogers, 2008; Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010b), but studies tied to the matrix of domination are virtually non-existent, especially where social media is concerned. Considering the traditional media's significant role within the matrix of domination and this study's findings of new media's role, this dearth appears to be a considerable gap that this study takes one small step in rectifying. As strategic communicators are commonly critiqued by consumers and researchers alike for their narrowly conceptualized (i.e., stereotypical) target markets and 2010 U.S. Census data demonstrated that the nation's population continues to diversify, researchers and practitioners have much to gain from intersectionality and the matrix of domination frameworks with regards to production, content, and consumption.

Quite simply, strategic communication is predicated on efficiently and effectively creating and disseminating messaging of use to targeted audiences. Researchers have shown links between intersectionality and the matrix of domination frameworks and message efficacy whereby messaging that is the most effective speaks to audience members holistically by acknowledging their intersecting identities (Tindall & Vardeman-Winter, 2011; Vardeman-Winter, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). Although that assertion was not tested in this study because it does not include audience reception, this study offers insight into the impact of intersectionality and the matrix of domination on both content and its production. Along with studying audience's reception of content developed with intersectionality and the matrix of domination frameworks as a guide, additional future research studies are proposed later in the chapter.

Practical Implications

The IGBP was not created for researchers like me to critically analyze its contents or production of that content. Rather, Savage and Miller developed the IGBP for the practical purpose of saving LGBTQ and questioning youth's lives. Accordingly, this study has practical implications as well as the methodological and theoretical implications outlined above.

For mental health practitioners and/or those working with LGBTQ and questioning youth and adults in various capacities (i.e. school guidance counselors, LGBTQ Center employees, etc.), the IGBP could be a resource to which those who are struggling with their gender, sexual, or both identities are directed, especially given its exponential growth, celebrity buy-in, extensive media coverage, and subsequent fame. However, as this study has shown, the identities that are (re)produced in the IGBP are limiting, such

that viewers are not exposed to the full range of LGBTQ and other identities possible to them. The IGBP content takes some steps toward addressing intersecting identities and the matrix of domination, but the extent to which this is done varies from video to video and by and large is lacking overall within the video content of this sample. Therefore, the IGBP can be a valuable resource for stopping suicide among some but not all potential viewers, and it is most beneficial if practitioners direct LGBTQ and questioning individuals to the IGBP along with its "competitors," the "Make it Better Project" and the "We Got Your Back" project, for more diverse representation.

Limitations & Future Research

The design of this study was purposefully exclusive: the extensive time required for both methods necessitated a smaller sample. The sample included Black, White, or multiracial individuals, to the exclusion of other races and ethnicities; members of working, lower middle, and upper middle classes; those who self-identified as male, female, or genderqueer; and individuals who self-identified as lesbian or gay. This analysis was meant to serve as the first step in a larger project that seeks to understand the production, content, and consumption of IGBP videos by those of various racial, class, and gender identities, and I intend to include those excluded in this first round of analysis in future iterations to more fully capture individuals under the LGBTQ umbrella and rectify previous LGBTQ research designs that focus exclusively on gay men or lesbians.

Therefore, first and foremost future research should include an expansion of this study's MCDA and in-depth interview framework to self-identified bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals of varying racial, class, and gender identities who have created

IGBP videos. Simultaneously, lesbian and gay individuals of racial, class, and gender identities not captured in this current sample should also be included. Doing so will allow for further exploration of intersecting identities and finer-grained distinctions between the impact of the matrix of domination on IGBP content and its production among those who identify as gender or sexual minorities beyond gay men or lesbians.

To obtain a holistic view of intersecting identities and the matrix of domination, it is also important to reach out to LGBTQ individuals who are aware of but *did not* participate in the IGBP to ascertain why that decision was made. By reaching out to those who opted not to contribute to the IGBP and seeking answers to why that decision was made, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the matrix of domination's impact on new media content and production.

In addition to making the study more inclusive of all identities, additional information pertaining to the IGBP content should be critically analyzed, such as the YouTube comments left under participants' videos. Not only is YouTube a site in which various forms of cyberbullying occurs, including and extending beyond that which is LGBTQ-related, bullying often takes place within the comments left underneath the videos. A CDA of these comments would offer further insight into viewers' intersecting identities and the matrix of domination within media content extending beyond the videos themselves. Moreover, inclusion of YouTube comments in future research studies aligns more closely with consumers' actual viewing experiences, as viewers have the potential to see both comments and video content.

To answer the empirical question of broader IGBP participation with ties to intersecting identities and the matrix of domination, a quantitative content analysis

employing a random sample of IGBP videos would offer additional insight into manifest racial, class, gender, and sexual identities. There are challenges in coders trying to ascribe identities to individuals based on what is presented in a YouTube video, but obtaining this empirical information will answer broader questions about patterns within the IGBP and LGBTQ media representation overall that feasibly cannot be ascertained in a timely fashion through other means like MCDA (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005).

Additional studies should consider consumption of the IGBP videos. While more than 50,000 videos exist today garnering over 50 million views worldwide, it remains unknown as to whom is consuming this content. Who is consuming it, how and where (on personal computers, mobile devices, etc.), and are there consumption differences based on consumers' racial, class, gender, and sexual identities? More pointedly, are these messages of hope being received by their intended audiences (why/not), and who beyond at-risk LGBTQ and questioning individuals (and researchers like myself) is watching them? These are empirical questions that can offer additional insight into intersectionality and the matrix of domination as well if it is found that only White, middle class or higher individuals who are considering or have already adopted an LGBTQ identity are consuming this content.

Lastly, the IGBP is just one of many online-based, social change projects related to LGBTQ suicide, bullying, and harassment. Comparative analyses of other projects, such as the "Make it Better Project" and the "We Got Your Back Project," should be conducted to determine if and how the production, content, and consumption of these videos varies from the IGBP and what their ties are to the matrix of domination.

Additionally, future studies should draw on historical social movements as additional points of comparison.

Closing Remarks

The media, in both traditional and "new" forms, reproduces ideas about what is valuable in a society (Collins, 2009). As Collins (2009) stated, "popular culture has become increasingly important in promoting these images, especially with new global technologies that allow U.S. popular culture to be exported throughout the world" (p. 93). The IGBP is a timely example of the media reproduction of identities through online participatory culture with ramifications for youth and adults alike. From the IGBP much can be ascertained about identity; LGBTQ bullying, harassment, and suicidality; LGBTQ media representation; and online participatory culture, as this study has demonstrated. I invite researchers to join me in taking additional steps forward to learn more about intersecting identities and the matrix of domination within production, content, and consumption of the IGBP.

Qualtrics Recruitment Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this brief survey about your participation in the It Gets Better Project. It should take approximately five minutes of your time, and your responses will be absolutely confidential.

If you are selected to be interviewed for the research study, within the next few weeks I will contact you at the e-mail address you provide below. At that point, more information about the research study will be provided and a date and time will be established for a video chat-based interview (i.e., Skype). By filling out this survey, you are consenting to participate in just this portion of the study (the survey).

Thank you again for your participation. If you have any questions before, during, or after this survey, I (Laurie Phillips) can be reached at laph@email.unc.edu.

1) Did you create a video for the It Gets Better Project?
   a. Yes
   b. No

*If "no," participants will be thanked for their time and offered an explanation of study's focus – those who have created IGBP videos. They will then be automatically exited from the survey.

2) Is that video posted on either YouTube or ItGetsBetter.org?
   a. YouTube
   b. ItGetsBetter.org
   c. Both
   d. Neither

*If "neither," participants will be thanked for their time and offered an explanation of study's focus – those who have created IGBP videos that have been posted online. They will then be automatically exited from the survey.

3) Would you be willing to participate in an interview about the It Gets Better Project?
   a. Yes
   b. No

*If "no," participants will be thanked for their time and offered an explanation of the study's purpose (interviews). They will then be automatically exited from the survey.

4) Do you currently live in the United States?
   a. Yes
   b. No

*If "no," participants will be thanked for their time and offered an explanation of my current U.S.-based focus. They will then be automatically exited from the survey.

5) Which of the following best represents your identity with respect to *race/ethnicity*?
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   b. Asian-American
   c. Black or African American
   d. Black or African American in combination with some other race
   e. Latino/a/Hispanic
   f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   g. White or Caucasian
   h. White or Caucasian in combination with some other race
   i. Self-identify (please fill-in-the-box)

6) Which of the following best represents your identity with respect to *class* within the last five years?
   a. *Lower class:* poorly-paid positions or on government transfers; some high school education
   b. *Working class:* clerical, pink and blue-collar workers; low job security; income of $16,000-$30,000; high school education
   c. *Lower middle class:* semi-professionals; income of $35,000-$75,000; some college education
   d. *Upper middle class:* profesionals or managers; income of $100,000 or greater; highly-educated (common to have a graduate degree)
   e. *Upper class:* executives, celebrities, and heirs; income of $500,000 or greater; often Ivy-league educated

7) Which of the following best represents your identity with respect to *gender*?
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. Intersex
   d. Transgender/Transperson
   e. Transman/masculine
   f. Transwoman/feminine
   g. Genderqueer
   h. Self-identify (please fill-in-the-box)

8) Which of the following best represents your identity with respect to *sexual orientation*?
   a. Lesbian
   b. Gay
   c. Bisexual
   d. Queer
   e. Fluid
   f. Questioning
   g. Heterosexual
   h. Asexual
   i. Self-identify (please fill-in-the-box)

9) What is your age in years? (please fill-in-the-box) _____

10) What is the URL for your It Gets Better Project video? (please fill-in-the- blank)
    _____

11) What is your e-mail address? (please fill-in-the-box)
    _____@_____

Please double-check that your e-mail address has been entered correctly. If so, then click the submit button to complete the survey.

Thank you very much for your participation! If selected for an interview, I will e-mail you in the next few weeks.

APPENDIX B:

Facebook Call for Participants

Hello everyone! I'm a doctoral student at UNC-Chapel Hill conducting a research study about participation in the It Gets Better Project (IGBP). I'm looking for U.S.-based LGBTQ individuals who have posted an IGBP video on YouTube who are willing to discuss their participation with me. The interview will take place at a future date/time convenient for you, conducted using Skype or Google chat.

If you are interested, please fill out this brief (less than five minute) survey that asks for some demographic information, your contact information, and the link to your IGBP video. The survey can be accessed here:
https://unc.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_6RuR15AxxqH2zKA

Thank you in advance!

APPENDIX C:

Twitter Call for Participants

PhD student conducting @ItGetsBetter research project. Made a video and interested in talking about it? Please take survey <u>here</u>.

YouTube Call for Participants

Hello! My name is Laurie Phillips, and I am a PhD student at UNC-Chapel Hill conducting a research study about participation in the It Gets Better Project. I am looking for U.S.-based LGBTQ individuals who have posted an It Gets Better Project video online and are willing to discuss their video with me. I came across your video on YouTube.

The interviews will take place at a future date/time that is convenient for you, conducted using video chat. If you are interested in participating in the study, please fill out this brief (less than 5 minute) background survey that can be accessed here: https://unc.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_6RuR15AxxqH2zKA

Thank you in advance, and if you have any questions about the study, please don't hesitate to ask!

Laurie

APPENDIX E:

Interview Protocol

(OPENING STATEMENT) Thank you again for agreeing to speak with me about the It Gets Better Project. This study is about understanding why you have participated in the IGBP. I will begin by asking you some questions about the project broadly, and then move to questions about your video submission, and finally LGBTQ media in general.

If there is a question that you do not want to answer, please let me know and we can move on to another. You do not have to answer *anything* that makes you uncomfortable, and you may end the interview at any time. If there is anything I have not asked but you would like to discuss, please let me know.

If everything sounds good, let's move ahead with the interview. (Ask for verbal consent to conduct the interview.)

I'd like to start our conversation by talking about the It Gets Better Project broadly.

Q1: Please tell me about yourself.

Q2: Please tell me about how you first learned of the It Gets Better Project.

Q3: Please tell me about the time you have spent with the It Gets Better Project. For example, have you watched many IGBP videos?
  How many would you estimate having watched?
     If so, do you watch certain types of videos? (celebrity, corporate, etc.)
        How do you choose what type of videos to watch?
     Or, why not?
  Have you visited the official IGBP website?
  Have you taken the IGBP pledge?
  Are you a fan of the IGBP Facebook page?
  Do you follow the IGBP on Twitter?
  Have you purchased any IGBP merchandise – t-shirt, book?
  Have you done anything else related to the IGBP?

Q4: What led you to participate in the IGBP?

Q5: Please tell me about your video. What are you doing in it exactly?
  Where were you when it was filmed?
  How was it made?
  Why did you make it?

Q6: In your video, you stated _____. What message did you want to convey by participating in the IGBP?
  Is there anything else that you wished you had/not included in your video?
  Who is your message targeting?

Q7: Do you think the IGBP has been effective in general?
  Why or why not?

Q8: There has been some media criticism about the project and its founder, Dan Savage, presenting a one-dimensional view of what it means to be LGBTQ. What are your thoughts about this criticism?
  About race in the IGBP?
  About gender?
  About class?
  About sexual orientation?

Q9: Do you believe that one LGBTQ community exists?

Q10: Besides the IGBP, have you participated in other anti-bullying projects?
  Why did you participate in _____?
    If no, what was unique about the IGBP that made you get involved in this anti-bullying project?

Q11: Besides the IGBP, have you participated in other LGBTQ-specific online projects, such as the NoH8 campaign, I'm From Driftwood, etc.?
  Why did you participate in _____?
    If no, what was unique about the IGBP that made you get involved in this LGBTQ-specific online project?

Q12: How about other LGBTQ-specific offline projects?
  Why did you participate in _____?
    If no, what was unique about the IGBP that made you get involved in this LGBTQ-specific offline project?

I'd like to understand more about the media you consume.

Q13: Have you seen the Google Chrome IGBP commercial?
      If no, send participants the link and ask that they watch the video
      (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7skPnJOZYdA)

Q14: What are your thoughts about the commercial?
      Do you think the commercial accurately reflects the IGBP?
      Why/not?

Q15: Can you think of any other ads, whether on TV, online, radio, in print, or elsewhere, featuring LGBTQ people?
      If yes, what/where?
      If no, why do you think that is?

Q16: What LGBTQ-specific media do you read or watch currently?
      LGBTQ-specific websites?
      TV shows?
      Movies?
      News sources?

Q17: Do you follow LGBTQ blogs, Facebook pages, tweeters, other social media, or participate in LGBTQ-specific online social networks?
      If yes, which ones?
          If no, why not?

Q18: Do you see yourself reflected in LGBTQ media depictions?
      What media?
          Why/why not?
      Does seeing yourself in the media matter to you?
          Why/why not?

Q19: What do you think is the future of the IGBP?

I want to thank you again, ___(name)____, for your time completing the survey and participating in this interview. Without your participation, this study would not have been possible.

If I have any further questions, would it be OK if I e-mailed then to you or we set up another time for a quick chat?

Once the study has been completed, I will e-mail you a copy of any written reports. If at any time you have questions about the study, I can be reached by e-mail at laph@email.unc.edu.

Thank you again!

APPENDIX F:

Table 1: Demographic Breakdown of Participants by Sexual Orientation

Name	Race	Class	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Age	State
Abbie	White or Caucasian	Lower middle	Female	Fluid/Gay	22	VA/MA
Kevin	Black or African American	Lower middle	Male	Gay	47	NJ
Rafael	White or Caucasian in combination	Upper middle	Male	Gay	46	TX
Thomas	White or Caucasian	Lower middle	Male	Gay	33	NY
Greg	White or Caucasian in combination	Lower middle	Male	Gay	24	MA
Joe	Black or African American	Lower middle	Male	Gay	24	AL
Jordon	White or Caucasian in combination	Working	Male	Gay	20	WA/CA
Kile	White or Caucasian	Upper middle	Male	Gay	60	CA
Lee	White or Caucasian	Upper middle	Male	Gay	45	CA
David	White or Caucasian	Upper middle	Male	Gay/Queer	52	CA
Dennis	White or Caucasian	Upper middle	Male	Gay/Queer	34	KY
Andie	White or Caucasian	Lower middle	Female	Lesbian	21	FL
Deb	White or Caucasian in combination	Working	Female	Lesbian	61	OH
Jill	White or Caucasian	Lower middle	Female	Lesbian	31	ME
Kaali	Black or African American	Upper middle	Female	Lesbian	41	NJ
Kim	Black or African American	Lower middle	Genderqueer	Lesbian	21	SC/VA
Kristin	White or Caucasian	Upper middle	Female	Lesbian	45	CA
Lauren	White or Caucasian in combination	Lower middle	Genderqueer	Lesbian	25	NJ
Sam	White or Caucasian in combination	Lower middle	Female	Lesbian	20	PA
Sarah	White or Caucasian	Lower middle	Female	Lesbian	26	MD

Table 2: Sample Video Statistics, Organized by Date Uploaded

Name	Date Uploaded	Length	Views	Likes	Dislikes	Comments	# of Videos
Deb	9/27/10	8:03	1,552	25	0	27	10
Kevin	10/1/10	10:06	4,140	41	6	151	39
Rafael	10/1/10	2:31	471	4	0	0	15*
David	10/4/10	4:58	4,440	40	1	56	1
Kristin	10/5/10	2:02	4,950	39	5	19	1
Kile	10/12/10	3:21	1,212	23	0	3	22
Jordon (1)	10/15/10	1:57	705	15	0	7	2
Lauren	10/17/10	6:26	215	2	0	0	1
Thomas	10/20/10	3:27	281	4	0	2	14
Jill	10/26/10	2:50	1,261	2	0	8	74*
Kaali	10/29/10	5:29	107	3	0	0	2
Lee	11/5/10	4:22	540	3	0	3	147
Andie	1/4/11	8:21	129	2	0	0	5
Kim	4/7/11	0:46	508	5	0	3	25*
Sarah	4/10/11	4:14	8,650	89	17	102	2
Jordon (2)	12/21/11	5:39	2,785	22	1	7	2
Sam	2/6/12	2:40	1,601	30	1	8	1
Joe	2/9/12	6:08	23	1	0	1	2
Greg	3/5/12	13:49	303	8	0	1	33*
Dennis	4/27/12	5:01	1,330	7	0	6	4
Abbie	5/9/12	4:40	1,928	42	0	12	1

* Gregory, Jill, Kim, and Rafael's video counts are asterisked because they are not representative of their personal YouTube accounts; their IGBP videos were uploaded to an organizational account.

Table 3: Participants' Self-identified Occupations within the IGBP Videos

Name	Occupation
Abbie	College student
Andie	College student
David	Rabbi
Deb	Singer-songwriter/Blogger
Dennis	Undisclosed
Greg	Graduate student
Jill	Non-profit: advocating for domestic abuse victims; Running for state office
Joe	Undisclosed
Jordon	College student
Kaali	Undisclosed
Kevin	Pastor
Kile	Undisclosed
Kim	College student
Kristin	High school teacher
Lauren	Blogger
Lee	Writer/Blogger/Speaker
Rafael	Non-profit: Resource Center Dallas
Sam	Army
Sarah	Undisclosed
Thomas	Undisclosed

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