Offering Hope and Making Attributions through YouTube: An Exploratory Ethnographic Content Analysis of the Social Change-Oriented "It Gets Better Project"

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Abstract
In response to multiple youth suicides, Dan Savage and Terry Miller founded a YouTube channel that later became the It Gets Better Project (IGBP). The ever-growing corpus of IGBP videos now includes over 50,000 "messages of hope" targeting at-risk LGBTQ and questioning youth. Employing Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) and the theoretical lens of attribution, this study offers insight into how LGBTQ bullying and harassment are discussed in the IGBP and to what they are internally and externally attributed. Findings revealed external attributions were more prevalent than internal attributions pertaining to types of harassment and bullying experienced as well as explanations of how "it gets better," with a focus on institutions as both the cause of and remedy for bullying and harassment.

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In the past few years, the media have identified more than one dozen youths who have taken their own lives as a result of peer harassment and bullying, all of whom were targeted because of self-identification as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), or peers' perceptions of their sexual orientation. In response to these recent suicides, relationship and sex columnist Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller created a YouTube channel on September 15, 2010 with the intention of disseminating life-saving messages to at-risk LGBTQ youths (Parker-Pope, 2010). What Savage and Miller founded soon became known as the "It Gets Better Project" (henceforth IGBP), a YouTube-based, user-generated project for social change containing strategic messages of hope from thousands of participants worldwide.

While the use of social media for the purposes of strategic communication is not unique (Rheingold, 2002; Shirky, 2010) nor is the propensity for LGBTQ individuals to use Internet-based applications to communicate with one another (Gross, 2003), the IGBP's use of a crowdsourced, user-generated medium to combat suicide is novel, and more pertinently, it offers theoretical insight into the psychological concept of attribution. Through an interpretive analysis of the role of attribution as depicted in the IGBP, this study seeks to understand how LGBTQ-centric bullying and harassment are discussed and to what they are attributed. Subsequently, the following literature review consists of three sections: 1) a brief overview of the IGBP; 2) an overview of how the Internet, and social media specifically, has been used by LGBTQ-identified and allied individuals historically; and 3) what can be surmised from the current corpus of LGBTQ-related suicidality research. Each section is discussed in turn.

Background on The It Gets Better Project

Prompted by a reader's comment on his Savage Love blog, Savage decided it was necessary to reach out to harassed LGBTQ youths directly to show them that life improves post-grade school (Savage & Miller, 2011). Realizing that young adults spend the bulk of their time online ("Trend Data," 2011), a portion of which includes both consuming and producing YouTube video content (Lenhart, 2012), Savage decided to target at-risk LGBTQ youths through the media vehicles they heavily consume and in turn bypass the need for poten-

tially socially conservative and/or homophobic school administrators' permission for entrance into school assembly halls (Hubbard, 2010).

Harnessing the power of user-generated video and crowdsourcing, Savage and Miller created an 8 ½ minute testimonial discussing their experiences of overcoming peer harassment and bullying and subsequently how their lives got better post-grade school. Through his syndicated column, Savage Love, Savage urged LGBTQ adults to participate by sharing their own stories (Savage, 2010). Theoretically, the YouTube channel would permit LGBTQ individuals of all demographics to be represented, as opposed to mainstream LGBTQ media representations that historically have been stereotypical and extremely narrow, when visibility is afforded at all (Aslinger, 2010; Gross, 2002; Kane et al., 2012; Sender, 2004; Streitmatter, 2009; Walters, 2003).

Since its inception, over 50,000 videos have been created in multiple languages, including messages from the famous and non-famous alike, such as celebrities, for- and non-profit organizations, international politicians, and everyday LGBTQ and allied folks, and videos have been viewed in excess of 50 million times ("About," 2013). The IGBP has experienced tremendous growth internationally as well, and IGBP affiliates have been developed in 12 countries: Australia, Chile, Denmark, Italy, Jamaica, Mexico, Paraguay, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland ("International Affiliates," 2013). Alongside the IGBP's exponential growth, the topic of LGBTQ youth suicide continues to be of considerable interest to mainstream and niche media, further fueled by news of additional youth suicides (Praetorius, 2011), transforming the issue of LGBTQ youth suicide from a purely minority concern into one of both cultural and political significance and immediate importance for numerous stakeholders including parents/guardians, educators, politicians, mental health practitioners, and strategic communicators. Extensive mainstream media coverage and commentary of youth bullying serve as additional evidence for this claim (Parker-Pope, 2011; Weise, 2010), as do IGBP inclusion within corporate advertising (Miller, 2011) and the comprehensive guidelines for anti-bullying laws and policies recently introduced at the state, local, and federal levels (Levy, 2013; Marra, 2013). Despite its influence on U.S. culture and public policy, the IGBP has been criticized extensively by those inside and outside of

the LGBTQ communities for its racist, classist, sexist, and bi/trans-phobic claims of life automatically getting better with time as well as for the project's controversial co-founder, Savage, who tends to be either loved or despised (Cage, 2010; Eichler, 2010; Herrera y Lozano, 2011; Novack, 2010; Puar, 2010; Tseng, 2010).

In addition to the practical implications of anti-bullying information and suicide prevention, the IGBP has methodological and theoretical implications for social media scholars. The IGBP is a veritable living archive of messaging dedicated to LGBTQ youths, and it is a distinct corpus that allows social media researchers to learn more about how social media tools are actively being used for social change. As a form of strategic communication, the videos present a unique and timely opportunity to analyze user-generated content targeted to – and in some instances produced by – a population that has only recently been included in suicide-related research (Haas et al., 2011). Before examining how LGBTQ-centric bullying and harassment are discussed and to what they are attributed, it is crucial to situate the IGBP within the broader context of LGBTQ individuals' online participation.

LGBTQ Individuals' Online Participation

As Davies (2010) asserted, "No future mode of expression or communication can flourish without respect for, understanding of, and reference to the past" (p. 134). Although a complete history of the LGBTQ communities' extensive online participation is beyond the scope of this study, a brief overview of LGBTQ individuals' online participation is necessary to situate it.

Since the mid-1980s, LGBTQ-identified Internet users and those engaging in same-sex behaviors, regardless of their identification, have gone online to find like others for sexual purposes, platonic relationships, and social support (Clift, 2010; Lazzara, 2010; Mowlabocus, 2010) through Internet chat rooms and message boards (Drushel, 2010) and various virtual communities (Barber, 2010; Berger, 2010; Edwards, 2010; Gregg, 2010; Hanmer, 2010; McHarry, 2010; Tsika, 2010; Whitesel, 2010). More broadly, LGBTQ individuals of all ages have used the Internet for identity development and confirmation purposes, as a way to challenge narrow mainstream media depictions of the LGBTQ populations, and to put forth a "commonality of experience" with the intent of building and reinforcing com-

munity (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). Because of the breadth and depth of LGBTQ online participation, Usher and Morrison (2010) declared, "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).

Within the expansive Internet landscape, LGBTQ individuals have used social media tools for a variety of purposes. For example, YouTube has been utilized by LGBTQ individuals for the purposes of: 1) drawing attention to teens bullied to death on account of their sexual orientation (Pullen, 2010); 2) publicly coming out through vernacular video (Alexander & Losh, 2010); and 3) seeking a romantic partner and chronicling a relationship's life cycle (Lazzara, 2010). In comparison, Myspace and Facebook have been used by LGBTQ individuals of all ages for both online extensions of offline sexual identities or for the beginning stages of claiming a minority sexual identity in general (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Drushel, 2010). Moreover, chat rooms bring together sexual minority populations such as married lesbians seeking community (Cooper, 2010), as do virtual communities like RealJock.com targeting gay men in the military when Don't Ask, Don't Tell (henceforth DADT) was in effect (Tsika, 2010), the UK-based "Fetish Scene" website targeting LGBTQ-identified fetishists (Barber, 2010), and transgender individuals' personal ads on Craigslist (Farr, 2010).

Scholars have argued that the Internet provides LGBTQ individuals "new possibilities for agency" that "encourage change and progress" (Pullen, 2010, p. 3) with "ramifications for identity, community, and political action" (Alexander & Losh, 2010, p. 46), yet others are adamant about how "online new media are a mixed blessing" concerning sexual health (Clift, 2010) and cyberbullying (Blumenfeld & Cooper, 2010). Alongside consideration of LGBTQ online participation, a brief overview of LGBTQ youth suicidality research provides further insight into the development of the IGBP, as described in the following section.

Suicidality Among LGBTQ Youths

The relationship between sexual orientation and youth suicide is not a new development despite the recent influx in media coverage according to Charles Robbins, director of the non-profit Trevor Proj-

ect, an organization focusing on LGBTQ youth suicide prevention (as cited in Weise, 2010). Correspondingly, the study of youth suicide is not a new phenomenon – among youths presumed to be heterosexual. LGBTQ youth-specific suicide research is sparse comparatively and limited methodologically, however, and within the acronym research has focused almost exclusively on gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals in descending frequency (Haas et al., 2011).

Much of the earlier LGBTQ youth suicide research conducted on a nationwide scale failed to include sexual orientation as a separate variable or was plagued by sampling problems, erroneous conclusions, or a lack of information pertaining to factors leading to increased risk among LGBTQ youths specifically (Eliason, 2011; Haas et al., 2011; Russell, 2003). Moreover, researchers' varying conceptualizations and subsequent suicide measures have made longitudinal comparison of LGBTQ youth suicide research extremely difficult, limiting the knowledge base and potentially paralyzing the creation of treatment programs (Saewyc et al., 2004). Haas et al. (2011) explained the need for separating suicidal ideation, attempts, and completion measures for validity and noted that LGBTQ suicide completion figures remain unknown because sexual orientation is rarely included in death records.

Overwhelmingly researchers have found that an LGB identity is correlated more strongly with suicide completion than is a heterosexual identity (Berlan et al., 2010; Mathy et al., 2009; Murphy, 2007; Qin, Agerbo, & Mortensen, 2003; Renaud et al., 2010). Comparatively, research on suicide attempts has found LGB individuals at greater risk than their heterosexual peers (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Lamis, & Malone, 2011; Mathy, 2002; Remafeldi et al., 1998; Russell, 2003; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2001; Zhao et al., 2010), with gender acting as a stronger predictor of attempts for males than females (King et al., 2008). Further complicating matters is the notion that sexual orientation and/or study participants' comfort level in disclosing their sexual orientation may change over time (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007). Youths who have same-sex attractions but do not identify as LGB are not as likely to be included in LGBTQ-specific samples (Savin-Williams, 2001), and the very measurement of youth suicidal behavior is both difficult to undergo given the challenges of recruiting youths for research studies and controversial (Kulkin, Chauvin, & Percle, 2000).

Before reaching suicide ideation, which Hammelman (1993) found started as early as age eight, LGBTQ individuals typically endure a number of stressors including harassment and bullying from peers. Proprietary research revealed that one-third of teens surveyed reported being harassed because of peers' perceptions of or self-identification as LGB, and nearly 90% of LGBTQ-identified students were verbally harassed, physically harassed, and/or physically assaulted during the past year (Harris Interactive and GLSEN, 2005). Compared to earlier findings, the frequency of sexual orientation-based harassment and assault increased between 2005 and 2009 and also expanded to online venues (Kosciw et al., 2009), including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace despite the sites' explicit anti-bullying policies.

Sexual orientation-based harassment and discrimination commonly continues into the college years as well, and certainly harassment and bullying is not limited to peers. LGBTQ collegians reported more harassment than their heterosexual peers based on their sexual minority status (Rankin et al., 2010), and a lack of counseling services offering LGBTQ-specific assistance for students further contributes to the problem (Wright & McKinley, 2011). As Savin-Williams (1994) found, lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths frequently receive verbal and physical harassment from peers and adults alike, both within and outside of the school environment, and additional stressors leading to suicidality include gender role nonconformity (Ploderl & Fartacek, 2006), familial or extra-familial issues (Diamond et al., 2011; Hammelman, 1993; Remafeldi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991), and stressors associated with the coming out process (Schneider, Farberow, & Krurks, 1989).

Not only are LGBTQ youths generally at higher risk for legal (tobacco and alcohol) and illegal drug use than their heterosexual peers, but that risk is heightened among LGBTQ bullying victims (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; King et al., 2008; Savin-Williams, 1994). Along with suicidality, the stressors also lead to problems at school, criminal activity, and homelessness (Savin-Williams, 1994), and LGBTQ youths have been found to be at greater risk for mental health problems (Fergusson, Horwood, & Beautrais, 1999), the prevalence of which has been associated with lacking state-level institutional protections for LGBTQ individuals (Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & Hasin, 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010). Moreover, familial support,

institutional support (predominantly schools), and support from non-familial adults can act as additional barriers to suicidal behaviors (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006).

While empirical suicidality research is ongoing and measures are refined, little research has been conducted on the use of crowdsourcing and social media for suicide prevention, nor has the concept of attribution been applied to user-generated strategic communication. As Haas et al. (2011) asserted, additional research must include subgroups within the LGBTQ populations, particularly those whom have been excluded previously. With the advent of technologies such as YouTube, digitally-savvy members of the LGBTQ populations previously excluded from mainstream media representation have the tools to create and disseminate their own messaging to reach LGBTQ-identified or questioning youth. LGBTQ populations no longer have to rely upon distorted and minimal mainstream media representations, or be subjected to researchers' typically invasive, non-inclusive, non-generalizable survey sampling techniques as the dominant form of suicidality-related research.

As Grusin (2009) asserts, YouTube "allows us to extend our senses beyond the range of our body's geographic environment, introducing us to people and places, sights and sounds that we would not otherwise have the opportunity to perceive" (p. 61), and Thornton (2009) labeled YouTube "worthy of study as a new cultural phenomenon" (p. 54) for reasons including but not limited to the fact that YouTube "allows for a cross-cultural dialogue" (p. 65). Ultimately, a YouTube video created as a statement or assertion of identity becomes a datum for this study. While the use of videos for educational purposes is not a new phenomenon (Snelson & Perkins, 2009), what is new is the sheer volume of content and accessibility. By harnessing social media's ease of participation, rapid speed of message dissemination, continually-growing archive of content, and global reach, the IGBP provides social media researchers an opportunity to learn about LGBTQ bullying and harassment on YouTube through the application of the theoretical concept of attribution, explained below.

Theoretical Framework of Attribution

Defined as "a process of making inferences about the unobservable characteristics of other people, objects, events, or ourselves" (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005, p. 34), attribution is a concept studied

extensively for nearly seven decades. As Forsterling (2001) describes it, attribution is both a descriptor of common sense and an explainer of how it works, and the "central focus of attribution research lies in the investigation of thoughts or cognitions and…how individuals select, process, store, recall, and evaluate (causally relevant) information and how the information is then used to draw causal inferences" (p. 10). Although the phrase "attribution theory" appears in academic literature with regularity, several theoretical frameworks fall under the heading of attribution and there is not one "attribution theory" (Kelley & Michela, 1980).

The concept of attribution is frequently viewed as originating in social psychology from Heider's (1944, 1958) research that was concerned with how everyday people make sense of both their own and others' behaviors and how those interpretations affect behavioral responses. Heider presented a conceptual framework for the scientific testing and theoretical development of what would later become attribution, though some argue that attribution's roots predate Heider (Forsterling, 2001). Building from Heider's framework, Jones & Davis (1965) introduced correspondent inference theory, followed by Kelley's (1967) attribution cube and Weiner's (1974) cognitive theory of motivation. In later work, scholars would argue that there are actually two branches of attribution-related research underway, termed "attribution" and "attributional" research: The former considers attribution's antecedents, including "information, beliefs, and motivations," whereas the latter considers attribution's consequences, specifically the "behavior, affect, and expectancy" (Kelley & Michela, 1980, p. 459).

A core component of attribution research concerns the distinction between internal and external attributions (Forsterling, 2001; Heider, 1958; Weiner et al., 1971). Internal attributions are explanations individuals ascribe to something within either her/himself or intrinsic to another person, whereas external attributions are explained by outside, environmental issues. Perhaps the most famous error within attribution research is Ross' (1977) fundamental attribution error in which individuals claim internal rationales for their own successes and external rationales for their own failures whereas for others, the exact opposite is true.

Because of its focus on casuality, the bulk of early attribution research used experimental designs to test hypotheses, but scholars

have employed other methods such as surveys (Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976; Wiley, Crittenden, & Birg, 1979) and quantitative content analyses (Bettman & Weitz, 1983; Lau, 1984; Lau & Russell, 1980; Peterson, 1980) to question attribution research's external validity outside the laboratory (Crittenden, 1983; Forsterling, 2001; Lau & Russell, 1980). In the last few decades, attribution researchers have employed various qualitative methods including discourse analysis (Hilton, 1990; Hindman, 1999; Staton, 1984) and ethnographic content analysis (Hindman, 2003), and Rees, Ingledew, and Hardy (2005) argued:

> …varied qualitative methodologies, such as categorical content analysis, paradigmatic analysis, conversation analysis, or narrative analysis might help us better understand and interpret the attributions people make and allow us to view the day-to-day process of attributional thinking. (p. 197)

Attribution research continues to take several methodological forms; has been studied across numerous disciplines; and has been combined with other theoretical frameworks in Sociology (Crittenden, 1983; Mathisen, 1989), Journalism (Hindman, 1999, 2003), and Business (Bettman & Weitz, 1983), among other disciplines. As attribution studies extend into strategic communication (Choi & Lin, 2009; Coombs, 2007; Golden, 1977; Jeong, 2009), this study considers a relatively new form of strategic communication taking place within social media. Heeding Heider's (1958) proclamation that through the "careful analysis of language expressions, we can attempt to arrive at concepts that will enable us to clarify the implicit relations among words referring to psychological phenomena" (p. 10); Lau and Russell's (1980) advice concerning the "usefulness of archival data to attribution research" (p. 36); and Harvey and Martin's (1995) assertion that "applications of naturalistic techniques to probe story-making activities are occurring for investigations of diverse populations that cannot be readily studied in the university laboratory" (p. 92), this study seeks understanding of attribution's role in the IGBP. Using Heider's conceptualizations of internal versus external attributions as a theoretical lens, this exploratory study answers the following research questions: 1) In what capacity are LGBTQ harassment and bullying discussed in the IGBP videos?; and 2) What is the role of attribution in the IGBP videos, and how is it manifested internally

versus externally?

Method & Limitations

Ethnographic content analysis (henceforth ECA) was used to analyze a sample of 50 IGBP videos and answer the research questions posed. A brief overview of the method is provided below, including rationale for using ECA as opposed to quantitative content analysis as well as information pertaining to the study's sample.

Altheide (1987) described ECA as a "reflexive" and "highly interactive" method "used to document and understand the communication of meaning as well as verify theoretical relationships. ECA is oriented to check, supplement, and supplant prior theoretical claims by simultaneously obtaining categorical and unique data for every case studied" (p. 68). Drawing from Mead, Blumer, Schutz, and Berger and Luckmann's theoretical and methodological positions, as well as Glaser and Strauss' conceptualization of constant case comparison, ECA is a systematic and analytic approach to studying media content with the goal of understanding not just standalone media content, but also how it was produced. As Altheide (1996) describes it, the method is situated on a methodological spectrum halfway between participant observation and quantitative content analysis.

Although ECA does incorporate numerical data into findings when applicable, it is important to distinguish the method from quantitative content analysis, which is rooted in the post-positivist paradigm and has the goal of objective verification through reliability and validity. Quantitative content analyses employ predetermined and theoretically-driven categories in coding protocols; ideally rely upon random samples; and statistically-based analysis is conducted on large sample sizes. Comparatively, ECA has the goal of subjective discovery and values a researcher's positionality; relies upon non-random, purposive sampling; and generally centers on the interpretive, in-depth analysis of a small corpus of data. An ECA may begin with some predetermined categories but places a strong emphasis on emergent categories, and the data collection, analysis, and interpretation stages are not separate and finite as in quantitative content analysis (Altheide, 1996). ECA has been used to study media content (Hindman, 1999, 2003; Stokes, 2007), although no published studies using ECA were found yet in which the media content analyzed included user-generated videos pertaining to a social change. Hence,

this study represents one of the first known attempts to do so.

Moving beyond the restrictions inherent within survey and experimental research where respondents must first be recruited and then answer researcher-dictated questions, this study offers an alternative perspective on harassment and bullying in the twenty-first century expressed through social media, is not subject to many of the measurement challenges characteristic of the quantitative suicidality research previously described, and the international reach of the IGBP offers data extending beyond U.S. borders. Because of this study's exploratory nature and desire to understand both how bullying and harassment are discussed and how the videos themselves were produced, using ECA permitted me to answer these research questions in a way that quantitative content analysis does not. Rather than approaching the study with a predetermined coding protocol and a focus on frequency, ECA purposefully allows for coding categories to emerge through data analysis and intentionally includes information outside of the videos to further enhance deeper understanding of the texts themselves. Before the pervasiveness and patterns of bullying and harassment verbiage and associated attributions can be ascertained, a baseline understanding of these categories must be established. Furthermore, because of ECA's focus on the verification of theoretical relationships, the method affords a way to determine the role of attribution within the IGBP and understanding about to whom or what IGBP participants blame their victimization.

Following the tenets of ECA, the study first involved watching a random selection of IGBP videos to get a sense of the project's structure while also reading extensively about the IGBP outside of YouTube through the official IGBP website (www.itgetsbetter.org), mainstream and LGBTQ niche media coverage of it, and social media chatter in blogs and on Facebook and Twitter. Doing so allowed for a deeper understanding of the IGBP's creation, overall objective, how participants developed videos, and who produced them in the project's initial launch, thereby setting the tone for the IGBP.

After watching several tens of videos, a preliminary coding protocol was drafted that included descriptive categories such as video setting, videographer's perceived sex, age, race, mentions of harassment and bullying types, and types of attributions that I used for the beginning stage of analysis. Because the goal was to understand the discourse presented within the first few weeks of the IGBP's launch

and ECA entails a deep understanding achieved through multiple readings of texts, a small corpus of IGBP videos was purposefully sampled for analysis. Fifty videos were sampled, which represented a 0.01% sample of the total IGBP population in existence today: 50,000 videos. Upon establishing sample size, a handful of the videos were reviewed and the protocol revised according to what was found within them. This iterative process of reviewing videos and revising the protocol repeated itself throughout data analysis, and all videos in the sample were viewed several times to check existing codes against one another and determine if other codes were emerging. All codes were tabulated on a spreadsheet in a data matrix listing pre-determined and emergent categories as determined.

One of the challenges of studying an ongoing social media-based project is that the content is constantly evolving, rendering it necessary to draw temporal boundaries to collect a sample for analysis. The IGBP is comprised entirely of user-generated content, and viewers can rank videos both by the number of times they have been viewed and by selecting "like" or "dislike" after creating an account and logging onto YouTube. The 50 videos with the highest number of views were selected as the unit of analysis because IGBP viewers determined these videos to be influential in some manner within the context of LGBTQ-centric harassment and bullying. In accordance with ECA, this study's sample included videos from one stage of the IGBP's development. Therefore, the study's findings are not intended for extrapolation to the IGBP as a whole, nor can they necessarily speak to topical themes and attributions within videos from other points within the IGBP life cycle. However, these highly-ranked videos offered insight into messaging pervasive at the IGBP's launch, which speaks to implications for audience reception (i.e., what is the IGBP actually saying; what tone was established at the outset?) as well as production (i.e., whom is creating the messages/setting the tone?). As will be divulged in the next sections, the sample was largely comprised of celebrities and therefore likely had unique implications for both audience reception and production.

All sample videos were uploaded onto YouTube within the first three weeks of the channel's founding. Using Snag-It, software that takes computer screen snapshots allowing for point-in-time categorization of constantly-changing websites, videos were copied from YouTube and digitally saved offline. After numbering each video and

tabulating length and number of views, preliminary descriptive statistics were generated to gain a cursory understanding of the project's composition in line with the tenets of ECA (Altheide, 1996), and descriptive data are provided in the next section including information about the samples' perceived racial, gender, and age demographics in conjunction with the settings in which the videos were filmed and videographers' appearance.

Analysis and Discussion

A total of 811 videos from the IGBP channel were captured on October 15, 2010, and within the sample of 50 videos analyzed, average video length was approximately four minutes. Sample videos ranged from nearly 30 seconds to almost 13 minutes in length. The most frequently watched video in the sample, Savage and Miller's initial contribution, had 846,683 total views at the time of capture, which had more than doubled by the time of writing. Comparatively, the fiftieth video had 16,060 total views.

Individuals with some degree of fame created over three-quarters of the sample videos. It is not entirely surprisingly that celebrity videos were the most watched at the time of the project's launch considering that youth are the IGBP's intended target audience and are likely drawn to celebrity endorsement. Actors and actresses from television, film, radio, and theater contributed videos, as did pop musicians, comediennes, Internet personalities, and politicians. The remaining videos were created by the non-famous, including police officers, marines, business professionals, composers, clergy members, and students. The vast majority of videos featured just one speaker providing a testimonial, and less than one-quarter featured multiple speakers. This sample's composition of celebrities has implications for how harassment and bullying are discussed as well as to what they are attributed. Celebrities' victimization is no less valid than everyday folks', but their dominance within the sample likely dictates the type of messaging subsequent videographers would include later on.

Within the predominantly celebrity-filled sample, additional information was gathered pertaining to gender expression, perceived age, and perceived race. Men accounted for over two-thirds of all videos; women were featured in less than one quarter of all videos; and both sexes appeared together in the remaining five. Self-identified transgender individuals appeared in just three videos. These findings

conflict with recent survey data from the Pew Internet & American Life Project that found women are more likely to participate on social networking sites than are men (Duggan & Brenner, 2013), though the survey did not account for transgender participation, further rendering data on transgender Internet usage sparse (Farr, 2010).

Alongside gender expression, videographers skewed younger: most videos were created by those appearing to be in their thirties (17 videos), twenties (nine), and lastly, forties (eight). Videos from teen producers as well as a handful from those in their fifties, sixties, and seventies also surfaced, and approximately one-fifth of the videos included multiple speakers of various ages. Videographers' age demographics align with Duggan and Brenner's (2013) recent findings that users of social networking sites skew younger: individuals between 18-29 years old index the highest, followed by individuals 30-49 years old.

The sample's racial composition was perceived to be almost universally Caucasian: 85% of all videos featured exclusively White speakers. Just two sample videos featured only Black speakers, and five videos featured a racially-mixed group (White, Black, and Asian), findings that are in direct opposition to Duggan and Brenner's (2013) survey research that found Hispanics and Blacks/African Americans (non-Hispanic) indexed higher than Whites on social networking usage, and more specifically video-sharing sites such as YouTube (Moore, 2011). Although a quantitative content analysis is necessary to offer definitive statements about the gender expression, perceived age, and perceived racial composition of IGBP participants holistically, subjectively these findings elicit notions of the user-generated IGBP reifying mainstream media representation of LGBTQ individuals as almost exclusively White, younger, and male – at least amongst videos most likely to be viewed (Aslinger, 2010; Gross, 2002; Kane et al., 2012; Sender, 2004; Streitmatter, 2009; Walters, 2003). Not only is this composition false when compared to available data on LGBTQ-identified individuals, it is problematic because the visual information undoubtedly provides additional information about what it means to be LGBTQ- or ally-identified and could serve as a detractor for viewers outside of these boundaries who may think that once again, they do not fit in.

By bringing in contextual information about the documents under study (Altheide, 1996), videographers' sexual orientation data

were gathered based on their own verbiage, captions beneath their videos, or information about them available online, independent of the IGBP. Individuals who self-identified as gay men comprised the majority of videographers, followed by heterosexual allies, bisexual men and women, and lesbian women, respectively, though several group videos did include individuals of various sexual orientations. Of the videos included in the sample, bisexuality and transgender issues were minimally discussed, rendering the second half of the acronym nearly invisible once again (Brooks et al., 2008; Grant et al., 2010; Kane et al., 2012) within IGBP videos garnering the highest viewership statistics. The projected IGBP image is that of gay men telling viewers of all sexual orientations, gender expressions, and gender identities that their lives will get better. However, videographers likely have little to no personal experience with viewers' multidimensional identities, thus making it possible for their verbiage to be overlooked or outright ignored by the intended audience. Future research should consider these results and use purposive sampling techniques to deliberately gather information from People of Color, including those with bisexual and/or transgender identities and varying gender expressions to gain additional IGBP understanding.

Having presented a brief overview of the sample's composition and articulating its limitations, I now shift to explaining the emerging themes that surfaced regarding how harassment and bullying are discussed in the videos and the role of attribution within the IGBP. In total, three themes emerged concerning how videographers discussed harassment and bullying: 1) personalization of experience, including discussions of the types of harassment and/or bullying they had faced and their own suicidality; 2) resources available to at-risk LGBTQ and questioning youth; and 3) hollow explanation and repetition of "it gets better" pertaining to viewers' current victimization. Each theme is elaborated on below.

Overarching Themes in the IGBP Videos

Unsurprisingly given the IGBP's focus, one theme that emerged was personalized discussion of the types of harassment and bullying videographers experienced. It is important to note that not all videographers either experienced or explicitly revealed getting verbally or physically victimized since some made videos simply to show their support of bullied LGBTQ youth; nearly one-third did not explicitly

discuss experiencing bullying or harassment. Within the remaining two-thirds, bullying or harassment-centric verbiage can be separated by verbal, physical, or a combination of verbal and physical attacks. Videographers' stories of their subjugation to others' verbal attacks were most common, as two-fifths of the sample described their verbal victimization in their video. Recollections of verbal harassment concentrated on the names they were called, which often centered on the intersection of sexual orientation and gender (i.e., "fag/faggot," "gay," "lesbian," "dyke," "homo," and "fairy") but also included racial and religious epithets as well. Actress Adrienne Curry's memories were among the most vivid, as she recounted peers called her a "fucking lesbian," "worthless dyke," "carpet muncher," and "fish eater" for kissing a girl in high school. Similarly, singer Danny Noriega recollected peers' hurling "every name in the book" at him, and Councilman Joel Burns' bullies told him "that he should die and go to hell where he belonged." Others stated more generally that they were harassed, bullied, "picked on," "ridiculed," "threatened," "tormented," "teased," or "scrutinized" without going into detail, though some pinpointed particular phases of schooling (elementary, middle, or high school) in which the harassment and bullying occurred, including one 14-year-old New York City youth whose harassment started in Kindergarten. Despite the IGBP's focus on youths surviving middle and high school hardships, some videographers noted that verbal harassment extends beyond grades K-12, to include this very project where bullies leave hateful comments underneath videos. Nonetheless, this acknowledgement was rare, and collectively the sample regurgitated the myth of victimization relegated exclusively to youths in grades K-12 as started in Savage and Miller's initial video. This myth was repeated numerous times throughout the sample and could have negative effects on viewers by promising youths that life gets better instantaneously upon leaving high school. Several libel and defamation lawsuits filed by adults subjected to others' sexual orientation-based verbal abuse offer evidence that these spatial and temporal claims are empirically false (Phillips, 2012).

Comparatively, victims who were physically attacked universally experienced both physical and verbal harassment, with bullies' verbal attacks taking place before, during, and/or after the physical altercations. Over one-quarter of videographers verbalized getting "beaten up," "roughed up," "punched," "kicked," "body slammed," "thrown

against walls, lockers, and windows," "picked up and spun around," "stuffed into bathroom stalls," "shoved," or "tripped" by their tormentors. One of the more graphic stories was relayed by a music composer named Harry who recounted getting "kicked in the head by a group of people, laying there in the middle of the street until a car comes up because they think you've been hit by a car." Videographers' testimonials also revealed that bullies frequently spat on their victims and threw objects at them, ranging from soda bottles to desks and chairs. Nearly all stories of physical attacks came from male videographers, but females were also subjected to some physical abuse as well. Nevertheless, the entanglement of sexual orientation and gender triggered bullies to direct their anger towards males whom they tormented for perceptions of their homosexuality, thereby equating their victims' gayness with femininity and demanding they prove their manhood through physical challenges. Recent suicide victims featured in the mainstream media were almost exclusively male, including Justin Aaberg and Billy Lucas' suicides in summer 2010 that prompted Savage and Miller to found the YouTube channel, and empirical research has shown that sexual minority males are more likely to attempt suicide than females (King et al., 2008).

Physical harassment and bullying were not limited to victims' bodies, however, as creators mentioned defacement of their physical property as well. Terry Miller divulged that his bullies defecated on his car in addition to scratching it and breaking some windows, while one Wicked cast member had eggs thrown at both his car and house by his harassers and another relayed eating his lunch in the bathroom because no one would sit with him in the cafeteria. Conceivably the most devastating form of victimization described included videographers getting thrown out of their parents' homes for revealing their sexuality because of their family's social conservatism and/or strict religious beliefs, and a lack of familial support for coming out has been proven it can lead to deadly results (Diamond et al., 2011; Hammelman, 1993; Remafeldi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991).

Beyond detailing the types of harassment and bullying experienced, another emergent theme included discussion of the various components of suicide, namely ideation and attempts. Six videographers recalled suicide ideation, ranging from frequent YouTuber Davey Wavey thinking about suicide abstractly to Bornstein planning to commit suicide six times but "always finding something else to do."

Five videographers recounted their own suicide attempts, including Councilman Burns' heartfelt speech in which he revealed for the first time anywhere that he had attempted to take his own life; Tim Gunn and Rannon's descriptions of swallowing large amounts of pills; David Valdes Greenwood's narrative of climbing a bridge and planning to jump off of it but being stopped by a neighbor; and porn star Buck Angel's emotional message of self-mutilation and attempting to take his own life. From this sentiment not only are the various stages of suicidality presented, but furthermore it can be surmised that IGBP videographers' intimate understanding of presumed viewers' extreme depression, loneliness, despair, and suicidality served as a motivating factor for their participation in the IGBP.

Alongside suicidality discussions, videographers frequently offered resources for at-risk LGBTQ youth, most often directing viewers to call the Trevor Project suicide hotline or visit the organization's website. Two videos were actually Trevor Project public service announcements featuring well-known LGBTQ-identified or –allied individuals explicitly driving traffic to the IGBP benefactor. In over one-third of the videos, specifically those created by celebrities, viewers were instructed to reach out to others for support, whether family members, teachers, school administrators, or librarians, or the nebulous people "who will listen" or "who you can trust." Musicians Joel Madden and A.J. McClean encouraged viewers to tweet them if they need someone to talk to; Gregory Gorgeous and Buck Angel instructed youth to e-mail or call them; and Sister Unity recommended viewers reach out to her on Facebook. Thus, some extended their services as anti-suicide resources by encouraging at-risk youth to reach out to them within and beyond social media. The latter videographers' proved to be the exception to the rule, however, as most simply offered viewers a one-way monologue with no further resources. While extending yourself as a resource for suicidal youth is an act not all are psychologically or temporally positioned for, the resources offered outside of a dialogical outlet were few. The Trevor Project's explicit focus on suicide prevention makes it a natural partner for the IGBP, but other anti-bullying and suicide prevention resources were ignored altogether, once again leaving viewers with little actionable information about where to seek help.

Information about when "it gets better" surfaced in conjunction with information detailing how – if found at all. Several videogra-

phers mentioned finding or establishing a community of acceptance through the creation of a new family and/or making new friends and placed great importance on finding others sharing similar sexual orientations and/or gender identities to establish support systems. As Jeffery Self declared, "You build a circle of people who love you and accept you for exactly who you are;" Scissor Sisters lead singer Jake Shears reiterated, "you make friends and create a family full of people that aren't crazy;" and Claire stated, "I have an amazing network of friends who are gay, straight, bi, pansexual, transgender, and I don't have to interact with the haters anymore if I don't want to." Additional support systems videographers presented included joining gay-straight alliances (GSAs) or other LGBTQ-affiliated youth groups and finding love interests ranging from girlfriends/boyfriends to partners or spouses. Gregory Gorgeous cautioned viewers that they might need to make changes in their own lives to allow these support systems to develop and warned viewers not to "think it's going to be an overnight thing; you're going to have to deal with some shit." Celebrities Perez Hilton, Adrienne Curry, and Jewel corroborated Gorgeous' rhetoric by explaining that with age comes perspective, as Jewel stated:

> I can't even tell you how much it gets better. It really, really, really does. It's a very temporary thing, adolescence, and you can really have any type of life that you choose. And you get to make those choices, so you've just got to hang on until you can have the freedom to do that. Until then, just be loud and be proud.

Videographers' explanations of finding or establishing community were problematic because they were predicated on the fact that this was done during adulthood, offering little hope to youth trapped in a vicious cycle of victimization and loneliness as adolescents or teens potentially several years away from reaching adulthood. Despite interim suggestions of joining GSAs or LGBTQ-affiliated youth groups and the proven therapeutic benefits of joining them (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006), videographers did not reference the reality that most at-risk youth who may not yet self-identify as LGBTQ (and even among those that do) likely are not psychologically ready to join such groups nor are groups geographically available or accessible to them in their current locales. Furthermore, the notion of finding community or joining non-existent LGBTQ-affiliated organi-

zations was also shrouded in rhetoric of leaving a hometown behind and seeking acceptance elsewhere, an activity that is classist in its implication and not financially feasible to all viewers.

As anticipated, video content varied tremendously, but the phrase "it gets better" proved to be an oft-repeated mantra, often times with little explanation or proffering of truly helpful information about how, when, where, and for whom "it gets better," and few videographers offered in-depth answers to these queries, which is a lingering criticism of the IGBP (Doyle, 2010; Veldman, 2010). Of those videographers who did elaborate, a handful mentioned life "instantly" improving the day that they graduated from high school; left behind households and family members that did not accept their LGBTQ identities; and/or moved away from their hometowns to American and Canadian cities known to be more gay-friendly. Others explained that life improved when they learned to accept themselves for who they are and stopped relying upon others' opinions to dictate their own self-worth. As two gay men within a four-person group video articulated: "Just because things have happened to you doesn't mean they have to continue" and "you are the captain of your own soul, your own fate." For Councilman Joel Burns, life got better with personal milestones: proposing to and marrying his husband; winning his first city council election; and gaining his father's acceptance. Not only does the very sentiment of "it gets better" demand problematization because of the numerous sociological assumptions underlying for whom it is likely to get better, but furthermore a regurgitation of the phrase "it gets better" alone is hollow and patently unhelpful to viewers looking for actionable insights into to how, what, where, why, and most pertinently, when their lives will improve.

One exception to the chorus of "it gets better" was Kate Bornstein's video in which she boldly proclaimed that life does not always improve; rather, sometimes it gets worse. While other videographers made passing mention of future challenges outside of the grade school walls – including an ACLU video in which one speaker tells viewers not to "give up and miss the good and bad parts of life" – Bornstein was one of the only people in the sample to blatantly question the repeated manta of "it gets better" overall. Bornstein, an Ivy League-educated transgender-identified author, playwright, performance artist, and gender theorist, has written and spoken extensively about gender and suicide internationally to youth and college

students and attempted suicide multiple times herself ("About Kate Bornstein," 2013).

Attributions within the IGBP Videos

After determining emergent themes of discussion, an understanding of what attributions were made within the IGBP was sought, specifically with regards to whom or what harassment/ bullying and assertions of life "getting better" are attributed. Both areas are explored in greater depth below to reveal and differentiate between both internal and external attributions.

Pertaining to bullying and harassment, videographers' internal attributions included blaming themselves for their misery, self-hatred, and internalized homophobia. For some, this self-hatred led to trying to "pray the gay away," suicide attempts, or family and friends-led interventions. Internal attributions were far less common than bullying and harassment-related external attributions, of which six categories surfaced: 1) school; 2) family; 3) government; 4) religion; 5) geography; and 6) general bullies.

Unsurprisingly given the IGBP's youth-centric focus and the fact that youth spend a substantial portion of time at school, school was cited as a frequent setting for bullying, and videographers' bullies included peers, teachers, and school administrators who often blamed them for getting bullied because of the way they spoke, behaved in gender non-conforming ways, or their refusal to "keep their private life private." Both teachers and politicians noted that schools need to be "safe havens" where kids are protected from harassment and not the site of such vicious attacks.

In addition to school-affiliated peers and adults, family members were frequently mentioned in the context of attributing bullying and harassing behaviors. Overwhelmingly, additional harassment came from family members who told videographers that LGBTQ identification is unnatural and they were doomed if they identified as such; hurled homophobic and sexist slurs at them; or otherwise made them feel like outsiders and isolated them from the rest of the family. One Muslim teen revealed that when he came out to his father, his father told him that the rest of the family could not hear about his sexual orientation and that he was a failure, though later his father eventually accepted his son back into the family. Because family members

can be the source of much support or abuse, which directly impacts suicidality as previously discussed (Diamond et al., 2011; Hammelman, 1993; Remafeldi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991), Councilman Burns and Perez Hilton cautioned viewers to speak to family members only if they are able to do so without retribution. On just two occasions, videographers spoke of having a strong family support system that accepted them early on.

Both state and federal governments were blamed for bullying, as were religious institutions and geography. Within government structures, anti-LGBTQ policies, such as marriage inequality/California's Proposition 8, DADT, and various state-level initiatives pertaining to unequal rights were cited as government-mandated evidence of bullying. Moreover, videographers also blamed politicians and political pundits for spewing homophobic rhetoric, as illustrated by comedienne Sarah Silverman's attack on voters and policymakers:

> Dear America: when you tell gay Americans that they can't serve their country openly or marry the person that they love, you're telling that to kids, too. So don't be fucking shocked and wonder where all of these bullies are coming from that are torturing young kids and driving them to kill themselves because they're different. They learned it from watching you.

Within religious institutions, religious zealots were criticized for lying to kids about their impending doom because of their sexual orientation, and individuals within both the Christian and Islamic faiths were cited as problematic for LGBTQ youth because of their hateful and misleading rhetoric. Interestingly, while clergy members and religiously devoted videographers outside of the sample have expressly challenged religious zealots' false discourse asserting homo/bisexuality and transgender identification are incompatible with major world religions (Bauer, 2010; songbyrd5, 2010; Taylor, 2010; Tupper, 2011), viewership of these videos was far less prevalent than that of celebrities who either did not speak of religion altogether or did little to challenge this prevailing sentiment.

One videographer noted vast differences in bullying and harassment based on where individuals live and that in some places it is "not possible to be out without being verbally or physically abused." The impact of geography was implicit such that many videographers

spoke from locales that were more gay-friendly than where they had grown up and their very suggestions for how and where "it gets better" perpetuated the myth of viewers having to leave their hometown communities behind in search of a more LGBTQ-centric life for it to "get better." Gray's (2009) ethnography of queer youth in rural Appalachia debunks this myth and demonstrates that one can find and project an LGBTQ identity in even the smallest and most conservative towns. Little research beyond Gray's has included rural LGBTQ youth, which is in itself problematic and serves to further perpetuate the myth of LGBTQ identity as attached to large, metropolitan areas.

In the final category, bullies were discussed in the abstract through the creation of an us-versus-them dynamic, including faceless mentions of "people" ("people are mean for no reason;" "picked on continuously by cruel people"), "them" ("you can't give up and let them win"), and "others" ("others make it a big deal that I'm gay"). Further examples of generalized attributions included Chris Colfer's statement that LGBTQ youth are committing suicide due to "tragic circumstances in their own environments;" comedienne Kathy Griffin's reference to statistics on the increased likelihood of gay teens committing suicide; others' mentions of a general lack of gay role models, LGBTQ-related groups, and broader homophobia; and Trevor Project PSAs that offered an outlet for at-risk LGBTQ youth by noting that they are "people who can help."

Collectively, the sample's minimal inclusion of internal attributions and broader focus on external attributions, such as school, family, government, religion, geography, and generalized bullies, is illustrative of the fact that videographers held social institutions accountable for their harassment and bullying and projected this onto their viewers as well. Videographers' assertions rendered social institutions as both heteronormative and sexist: they are composed in such a way as to ideologically condone this behavior and set up LGBTQ-identified individuals to be victimized across multiple dimensions. Subsequently, videographers' framed their own and others' harassment and bullying as a societal, institutional problem and not one of an individualized nature. Embedded in this framing is validation of the IGBP existence and videographers' reassurance that viewers are not alone in their victimization and are also freed from responsibility for their bullies' ignorance and subsequent abuse.

In addition to attributions pertaining to bullying and harassment, videographers also made attributions in their discussions of life "getting better." Internal attributions consisted of life improving through self-acceptance, positive thinking, "controlling your own destiny," and "doing whatever it takes to make your life more worth living." As with bullying and harassment, external attributions far outnumbered internal, and most commonly external attributions concerning school, family, religion, and generalized comments surfaced. Videographers explained that high school is "just a phase" and that once viewers are free from its clutches they will have greater freedom to find like-minded individuals. Life improved for some when they finally experienced familial acceptance, and Bishop Gene Robinson offered insight into how life gets better through acceptance of God who "loves you the way you are despite the message you're receiving from religious people." Generalized attributions included the ever-present notion of time healing all and "society starting to be more accepting," alongside viewers' ability to find hope from the IGBP internally and externally and to create a support system through making new friends.

On the whole, the frequency of videographers' attributions pertaining to harassment, bullying, and life "getting better" were externally attributed to situational or societal influences, particularly social institutions, than internally attributed to victims' personal characteristics. To some extent, external attributions are logical within the context of harassment and bullying stories, particularly among those who are now far removed from their specific experiences of being victimized as youth, and internal attributions could be indicative of victim-blaming. Yet, it is less expected for internal attributions to be so few and far between in discussions of how videographers proactively found ways to improve their own life situations or for videographers not to have placed greater emphasis on the likelihood that at-risk, suicidal youth are internalizing the reasons for their victimization. Having said that, viewers' victimization is implied by the very creation of the IGBP. Through an almost exclusive focus on external attributions/social institutions, effectively videographers are leaving at-risk LGBTQ youth to believe they must depend on others (and institutions) for their own happiness. While many scholars have argued that significant institutional changes are necessary (Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & Hasin, 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Pullen, 2010), they

are sure to be slow-moving and in the meantime victims are trapped within many of the institutions that are the very cause of their current victimization and suicidality, and some may not have the patience to wait out the changes.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, videographers' narrowly-focused, explicit verbiage offers minimal information regarding their own experiences of LGBTQ-specific harassment and bullying, resources for viewers, or in-depth explanations about how life "gets better," potentially leaving viewers with more questions than answers. On account of the sample's predominance of celebrities, many of whom likely jumped on the proverbial bandwagon and perhaps used their IGBP participation as cause for additional publicity, oftentimes simplistic messages featuring little more than a repetition of the phrase "it gets better" were put forth. The vapid verbiage leaves at-risk youth without much understanding of others' victimization experiences and thus a sense of kinship. More importantly, most videographers neglected to offer tangible information about how viewers are to survive their own current predicaments. Instead, videographers' glossed over both their own past abuses and their hardscrabble path to current happiness. In doing so, they perpetuated the myths of bullying and harassment as confined to K-12 schooling and life getting better post-grade school, neither of which have been empirically proven.

The study affords researchers a unique look into the process of internal and external attributions, and findings revealed that videographers were more likely to make external attributions about both their experiences of being verbally and/or physically harassed or bullied as well as how life gets better. In both instances, institutions were blamed for videographers' victimization but also viewed as an integral component of how life improves. Representing one of the first known studies to combine ECA with the theoretical lens of attribution, the study offers researchers broader methodological and theoretical applications. As previously explained, much attribution research has been limited to experimental design, but this study and its predecessors have shown that attribution research can extend beyond the laboratory setting. Accordingly, there is much more to be learned about attribution through the use of varying research tools,

including but not limited to how attribution research findings are confirmed or challenged through new media tools.

The pervasiveness of LGBTQ-centric harassment, bullying, and suicidality continue, and social change projects are increasingly likely to contain a sizable online portion rendering additional research into both necessary so that problems can be identified, solutions proposed, and the efficacy of online-based social change projects understood. Social media provide one forum for doing so given the frequency with which these discussions continue to take place online and the ever-expanding corpus of social media sites. Moreover there are several fruitful avenues for additional interdisciplinary research considering message content, production, and consumption.

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