Motivations for Participation in the YouTube-based “It Gets Better Project”

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Abstract

In response to multiple LGBTQ youth suicides in 2010, Dan Savage and Terry Miller sought to provide messages of hope to at-risk LGBTQ youth through the YouTube-based “It Gets Better Project” (IGBP). With empirical data gathered through online chat-based in-depth interviews, this study offers insight into multi-dimensional motivations for participation in an online community. Pointedly, data show how the intersection of participants’ identities and structural oppressions contribute to their motivations for participation.

1. Introduction

In 2010, multiple U.S. youths committed suicide because of self-identification - or peers’ perceptions of them - as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ). In response to these suicides, columnist Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller created the YouTube-based “It Gets Better Project” (henceforth, IGBP). To date, the IGBP includes more than 50,000 videos of hope from LGBTQ and allied individuals, which have garnered more than 50 million views [1], and the IGBP spans multiple online platforms, including itgetsbetter.org, an official blog, and social media presence (YouTube, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and Google+).

The IGBP’s continual growth domestically and internationally, including international affiliate programs on five continents and numerous partner programs; participation from LGBTQ and allied individuals of many races, ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, gender identities, ages, professions, etc.; and extensive earned media impressions about LGBTQ youth harassment, bullying, and suicide are impressive in the broader landscape of social media and online communities. Furthermore, the IGBP provides a robust opportunity for scholarly investigation of strategic communication, identity, and motivations for participation in an online community.

Accordingly, through in-depth interviews with U.S.-based LGBTQ adults who created IGBP videos, this study offers empirical evidence of motivations for participation in an online community that originated on YouTube. It does so by considering the role that intersecting identities play in participants’ motivations for participation and answers scholars’ calls for extending the intersectionality framework to strategic communication [2]. Relevant literature pertaining to online-based strategic communication and intersectionality is reviewed below.

2. Online-based Strategic Communication

A substantial body of research now exists concerning how organizations, stakeholders, and communication professionals use online-based tools to achieve their goals. Each body of literature will be reviewed briefly, followed by a review of the online-based tools most commonly researched thus far to situate this study in the broader research discourse.

2.1. Organizational, Stakeholder, and Practitioner Vantage Points

The vast majority of research concerning online-based strategic communication has been conducted from the organization’s perspective, including how for-profit, nonprofit (NPOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies, and politicians communicate to (but rarely, with) their stakeholders. More pointedly, studies center on how organizations use online tactics for image construction or restoration, impression management, reputation, or corporate social responsibility [3]. Within this literature, scholars most frequently examined the dialogic promise and frequent failure of organizations using online-based tactics to communicate with stakeholders or the broader areas of relationship building and management extending beyond dialogic theory [4].

Corporate communication dominates much of the scholarship, with researchers’ oft-repeated promise of how practitioners would soon be partaking in online, simultaneous dialogic communication with stakeholders [5] and how corporate entities “manage communication that flows directly between organizations and mass audiences without the gatekeeping function of journalists and...
This promise was also extended to NPOs and NGOs but with similar findings: most organizations continue to use online tools in a one-way fashion to speak at their stakeholders [7].

Other substantial bodies of this literature are focused on how organizations use the Internet to communicate during crises or disasters and how institutions of higher education specifically communicate online [8]. Though infrequently, researchers have also investigated organizations’ online-based tactics for multicultural outreach efforts, philanthropy, fundraising, and stewardship [9].

Comparatively, the study of how an organization’s stakeholders use online tactics has received far less scholarly attention, though when conducted this research tended to focus on how activists use the Internet [10]. Coombs argued that “activists have a new weapon which can change the organization-stakeholder dynamic – the Internet” that serves as a “potential equalizer” between both entities [11]. Additional stakeholder studies concern employees and consumers [12].

Another body of literature looks at practitioners’ use of online tools, most commonly framed as global practitioners’ tool perception, adoption, or usage. Subthemes consider how specific types of communicators use various communication tools (i.e., health and university communicators), and practitioners’ perceptions of their roles and power derived from online communication [13].

### 2.2. Online-based Communication Tools

While it is important to understand scholars’ foci when studying online-based strategic communication efforts such as the IGBP, equally important is an understanding of the online tools that have been studied thus far. Not surprisingly, the amount of published research tends to follow the development and use base of a subset of online tools, beginning with early studies of the World Wide Web’s (WWW) potential and realized importance to practitioners [14]. By far the most expansive body of literature concerns organizational and stakeholder websites [15], which is logical considering that for years online presence meant having a website. Several scholars have also investigated blogs alongside a smaller subset of message board/forum-based research [16].

Beyond broadly-labeled “WWW” or “website research,” social media has increasingly dominated multidisciplinary scholars’ foci because of its pervasive use - and trade publications’ ongoing claims of how it is transforming strategic communication specifically. Newer forms of social media now dominate the strategic communication literature, including international studies of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, podcasts, and social media bookmarking services, and social media-centric research continues to saturate interdisciplinary academic conference programs as well.

Summarily, scholars have approached online strategic communication from various perspectives, examined multiple tools, employed numerous research methods, and have done so with an increasingly global focus. However, literature gaps remain, particularly considering stakeholders’ social media-based strategic communication efforts. Given the continual blurring of presumed organizational-stakeholder separation in part because of crowdsourced entities such as the IGBP [17], this narrow, organization-centric focus continues to limit scholars’ holistic understanding of online strategic communication. Hence, this study furthers understanding of how and why individuals are motivated to participate in online communities.

### 3. Intersectionality & The Matrix of Domination

In the context of men’s violent acts committed against women of color, Crenshaw argued that race and gender are intersecting entities, the combination of which affect social structures, politics, and media representation [18]. She defined intersectionality as “a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender” and explained how feminists and civil rights advocates detrimentally had ignored the existence and importance of identity intersection.

Since Crenshaw’s seminal work in legal studies, scholars have extended the intersectionality framework to gender studies, sociology, psychology, political science, education, law, business, medicine, journalism, and most pertinently, strategic communication [19].

Collins built upon Crenshaw’s framework and asserted that intersectionality focuses on oppressive forces working together (i.e., race, gender, class, and sexuality) but falls short of articulating the systemic organization of power/oppression. Collins coined the term “matrix of domination,” defined as “the overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained.” In further theorizing that four elements of power combine to form the matrix, Collins explained that each element is both dependent on and independent from the others: “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 individual consciousness*” [20].

The shape this domination takes has shifted temporally and spatially, but in the U.S. systemic oppressions have surfaced in multiple social institutions, including the media. Collins asserted that heterosexuality as the norm/homo-sexuality as deviance are media constructions, and the groups to which one belongs become more or less salient depending upon the situation at hand so that race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, etc. may be a more immediate source of media oppression than others. Nonetheless, that immediacy does not negate the existence or impact of other group memberships, and both unique individual and group standpoints exist.

Vardeman-Winter, Tindall, and Jiang advocated for applying the intersectionality framework to public relations research by stating that: 1) “current public relations research and practice is limited because of the dominance of the traditional paradigm of publics’ identity as comprised of discrete demographics;” and 2) “intersectionality requires deeper, richer, more ethnographic understanding of publics’ identities and experiences” [21]. Answering that call, this study examines IGBP participants’ motivations for participation through the lenses of intersectionality and the matrix of domination. Accordingly, the following research questions were posed: RQ1: What motivated video producers’ to participate in the IGBP?; and RQ2: If and how are individuals’ motivations for participation tied to their intersecting identities and the matrix of domination?

4. Method

I conducted online-based, semi-structured in-depth interviews to answer the research questions posed. Lindlof and Taylor deemed interviewing an appropriate method for seeking understanding of individuals’ motivations for participation through their own words [22], and the method is preferable when explanatory information is sought from marginalized audiences about sensitive topics [23]. Moreover, scholars have insisted it is best to study online environments in a way that most accurately reflects them [24], thereby rendering Skype and Google Hangouts a logical fit for interviewing YouTube video creators.

In order to recruit participants and avoid my problematically ascribing labels to their multifaceted identities from a YouTube video alone, I created an online recruitment survey and distributed it through YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter where participants self-disclosed their age and racial, class, gender, and sexual identities.

Using intersectionality and the matrix of domination as theoretical lenses necessitated a racially, class, gender, and sexually diverse and thereby purposive sample. My sample of 20 participants included 10 who self-identified as White/Caucasian; six as “White/Caucasian in combination with some other race”; and four as Black/African American. Furthermore, seven individuals identified as upper middle class, 11 as lower middle class, and two as working class; eight identified as females, 10 as males, and two as genderqueer; and nine respondents identified as lesbian and 11 as gay.

I also asked participants to record their age and location because of the inherent generational and geographic differences among LGBTQ individuals. Preferred LGBTQ descriptors differ considerably based on age [25], and after watching several IGBP videos prior to conducting interviews it was apparent that age contributed to content. Participants ranged from 20 to 61 years old, averaging 35, and tended to skew younger in this sample. Because of institutional differences across the U.S., including but not limited to: 1) state laws concerning anti-bullying and hate crimes; 2) types of same-sex relationship recognition; 3) workplace protections and benefits; and 4) types of healthcare services, visitation rights, and medical provider knowledge (see www.hrc.org); I was interested in ascertaining whether LGBTQ participants’ geography was germane to their motivations for participation. Although the sample slightly skews toward the East Coast, participants were geographically dispersed across the U.S. in AL, CA, FL, KY, MA, ME, MD, NJ, NY, OH, PA, SC, TX, VA, and WA.

As with any sample, there are limitations concerning whom is included and excluded. The purposive sample sought to be broad enough to capture within-sample variation while narrow enough to permit saturation, key for the interview method. Data analysis starts when decisions are made about how interview data are collected, and my calculated decisions regarding inclusivity reflected both the theoretical frameworks employed and the types of responses I received from the recruitment survey. Accordingly, this sample is limited to self-identified gay men and lesbians.

Post-interview, I conducted a close, line-by-line reading of all 20 participants’ transcripts, which when professionally transcribed resulted in 414 single-spaced pages of text. I followed Kvale and Brinkmann’s description of “meaning-focused” analysis [26], which involved open coding. This data-driven process of open coding, derived from the
grounded theory method [27], involves “attaching one or more keywords to a text segment in order to permit later identification of a statement.” I did not develop concept-driven codes in advance of data analysis but rather inductively coded the data. Several additional full-text readings were completed involving my iterative modification of codes based on what data surfaced in others’ transcripts. I employed the grounded theory technique of constant case comparison when comparing each interview against one another to find where participants’ motivations overlapped and diverged from one another [28] and then conducted additional readings to distill the data, modify codes, and develop categorizations capturing the “fullness” of participants’ motivations for IGBP participation [29]. Multiple themes and sub-themes emerged in the process, explained below.

5. Findings

Before presenting the aforementioned themes and sub-themes, an understanding of when, where, and how participants first learned of the IGBP alongside the types of videos they watched before and after creating their own is beneficial. Both components provide insight into participants’ IGBP knowledge and overall engagement, which contributes to their multiple motivations for participation.

The majority of participants learned of the IGBP within the first six months of its launch, from one of three ways: 1) social media or other online spaces; 2) Savage; or 3) their offline social networks. More specifically, some watched videos that appeared in their Facebook news feeds; were introduced to Savage and Miller’s video by a YouTube algorithm; or read about the IGBP on gay-themed blogs. Others stumbled across it when surfing, while news coverage led still others to the project, particularly Savage’s blog, syndicated columns, and TV appearances. Moreover, offline interactions with friends, colleagues, professors, and alumni organizations directed yet others to the IGBP.

When I asked about the IGBP videos that participants watched, as expected there was variance in type and number. All referenced watching videos by everyday folks like them, such as David’s articulation: “I also watched a number of ‘nerds and their laptops,’ like myself.” Several participants revealed watching celebrity videos, and those who did tended to skew younger. Most commonly participants watched a narrow selection of videos pertinent to their own intersecting identities (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, occupation, geography, etc.). Case in point, Andie watched “mostly female videos...because they were definitely more along the lines of what I’ve experienced personally;” Sarah was drawn to videos created by other devout Christians; and Dennis, Sam, Jill, and Kaali’s viewings of military- or politically-themed videos aligned with their professions. Interestingly, only a handful mentioned ever seeing Savage and Miller’s initial video, the springboard for the IGBP.

Naturally, participants’ intensity for and length of engagement with the IGBP varied as well. Illustrating this finding, Deb, Kevin, and Lee recounted watching numerous types of videos with varying levels of zeal. Deb emphasized the importance of watching others’ YouTube videos on an ongoing basis and providing them with positive feedback in the comments section, while others described an intense initial engagement followed by an inevitable lapse of interest. Lee viewed several videos initially but later complained of “drowning in information” and found the IGBP to be “overwhelming” because of the expansive video collection, and he was now only “interested in the unexpected or ironic.”

Collectively, these data offer important insights for scholars because they demonstrate awareness, a necessary precursor to online community participation and a component of longer-term engagement. In all, extensive data synthesis revealed three main categorizations of motivations for IGBP participation: 1) camaraderie; 2) rectification; and 3) media representation. Each category consists of multiple sub-categories, explicated below. It is crucial to note that all participants’ motivations for IGBP participation were multidimensional, thus the categorizations below are not mutually exclusive.

5.1. Camaraderie

When asked why they participated in the IGBP, many indicated a sense of camaraderie with their presumed target audience of at-risk LGBTQ youth: they were kindred spirits because of the hardships all face(d). Within this overarching feeling of camaraderie, participants mentioned: 1) recognizing viewers’ stories within their own; 2) their experiences with suicidality; and 3) camaraderie with Dan Savage.

5.1.1. “I Recognized My Story in theirs.” Given Savage’s original goal of persuading “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 IGBP [30], it was not surprising that individuals who did so saw some facet of their
intersecting identities and life stories in their target audience. All participants had experienced prejudice or discrimination in some capacity as a result of their sexual orientation, if not because of other identities (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, religion, occupation, etc.) or the intersection of them, and they sought to demonstrate that understanding to viewers while virtually consoling them.

Ascertaining that IGBP participants recognized some aspect of themselves among the project’s target audience (and broader IGBP community) aligns with researchers’ findings about why individuals participate in online communities [31]. Individuals’ first step in participating in nearly any organization-sponsored activity – whether online or offline – is generally tied to an appeal to their own self-interest [32]. As I dug deeper, participants parsed out why they “recognized my story in theirs,” including the personal impact of suicide.

5.1.2. “It was going to be by hanging.” The impact of suicide was instrumental in persuading over half of participants to share their stories because they were at risk for being suicidal, had been suicidal, or had experienced the loss of family members, close friends, or colleagues. Among the suicidal, participants ranged from suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts, which psychologists have defined as the stages of suicidality [33]. Demonstrating this range, Joe described how he planned to hang himself with an extension cord after school but fear prevented him, whereas Kile revealed it was a logistical error (i.e., a broken rope) that resulted in his failed attempt. The once suicidal participants intimately understood not just viewers’ physical and emotional pain but furthermore the psychological processes underlying how they came to be suicidal, and they were actively trying to prevent LGBTQ youth from taking their own lives.

Alongside participants’ recounts of suicidality, others indicated they were not suicidal but easily could have been due to their subjection to others’ vicious and persistent harassment and bullying. In turn, participants’ experiences motivated them to share their survival stories to denote hope, encourage viewers to work through present challenges, and persuade them that suicide is not the solution.

Research has shown that peer abuse is correlated with youth suicide, as is a lack of support from family, friends, churches, social groups/organizations, etc. [34]. Not surprisingly, participants experienced varying levels of support from their social networks and institutions: Some did not have their family’s support to openly identify as gay or lesbian, but their friends, spiritual leaders, and others were literal lifesavers. The reverse was also true: strong familial support prevented others from partaking in suicidal ideation, planning, or attempts altogether.

Outside of their own suicidality, being subjected to the pain of losing family members, close friends, and colleagues to self-inflicted wounds was a catalyst for several participants to join the IGBP, as Jordon described: “My community…there’s really something going on that a lot of people just don’t understand. In the past two years alone 13 kids have committed suicide, and then within the last five there has been about 18…In fact, one of them was my little brother back in January.”

Whether through acknowledgement of their own risk, suicidality, or loss of those close to them, participants expressed a deep understanding of the mental anguish their viewers are going through, which in turn resulted in camaraderie. This camaraderie extended beyond intertwining life stories and suicidality to include kinship with Savage.

5.1.3. “I Really Like Dan Savage.” 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, transphobic, and more [35]. During our interview, Jill proclaimed, “Dan Savage is such a polarizing figure in our community. People either love him or hate him,” and for some, it was their admiration for Savage or his writing that spurred their desires to participate. Case in point, Joe learned of the IGBP upon seeing Savage on television and was instantly captivated because of the connection he felt to Savage, predicated on their strict Christian upbringing. Akin to how celebrity spokespersons are used in strategic communication campaigns because they are viewed as opinion leaders or influentials with transferable brand equity [36], Savage’s equity was transferred to the IGBP and explicitly or implicitly led some to contribute videos. Alongside participants’ camaraderie was an urge to rectify past or present voids through their videos.

5.2. Rectification

As a function of seeing younger versions of themselves in their target audience, participants spoke of wanting to provide viewers with elements missing from their own experiences. That contribution took the shape of a YouTube video, and for other participants it extended further to serving as offline role models or confidants. Moreover, motivations for participation were both altruistic and self-serving, and some mentioned wanting to change
the discourse around LGBTQ issues more broadly in part because they felt a moral and ethical obligation as LGBTQ individuals to do so. Under “rectification,” five sub-categories emerged, the first being participants’ attempts to fill a past or present void.

5.2.1. “Exactly What I Would Have Needed.”

Multiple participants proclaimed they could have benefited from the IGBP during their own turbulent adolescences or adulthoods and thus decided to lend their voice to the project. Certainly, the U.S. sociopolitical climate for LGBTQ individuals has changed exponentially within the last several decades, yet regardless of their age or when they came out, nearly all explicitly or implicitly expressed similar sentiment.

When reminiscing about their childhoods, participants’ verbiage indicated they too could have benefitted from having someone reach out and tell them life would get better pertaining to the internal and external homophobia, sexism, and victimization to which they were subjected. As Andie explained, “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.” Several participants described wishing they had a positive lesbian or gay role model to help them through their coming out processes and in turn wanted to offer guidance for viewers.

Implicit and explicit discussions of role models consisted of two related dimensions, specifically participants’ desires to: 1) have had a role model during their coming out processes and/or 2) actively serve as a role model now. Because the timing of participants’ coming out processes fluctuated, their desires for having and being role models extended beyond adolescence. Moreover, there was variance in when participants realized they were role models (before, during, or after filming) and whether they wanted to serve as role models, participants’ visual and aural displays of pride were intended to offer viewers present and future optimism. While being proud of their sexual identities, others were driven to participate in the project in response to their parents’ lack of support and/or in part because of their current roles as parents.

5.2.2. “I’m Proud of Being Gay, but it took Me a Long Time to Get Here.”

For most, their coming out processes lasted several years due to the extensive internalized and externalized homophobia experienced. Because all participants knew firsthand what it’s like to struggle with questions of sexuality and the bravery required to come out, several wanted to share their experiences and be a source of support during viewers’ identity development. As Sam explained, “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.”

The coming out process is intimately intertwined with the IGBP’s target audience who is either struggling with their sexual orientation (“identity confusion” [38]) or already self-identifying as LGBTQ but likely not out to others nor proud. Akin to serving as role models, participants’ visual and aural displays of pride were intended to offer viewers present and future optimism. While being proud of their sexual identities, others were driven to participate in the project in response to their parents’ lack of support and/or in part because of their current roles as parents.

5.2.3. “It’s Like the Big Pink Elephant in the Room.” For some, their inclination to contribute was intertwined with how their parents respond(ed) to their non-heterosexual identities. For example, Abbie, Andie, Jordon, and Kim’s decisions to disseminate videos were made partially in response to their parents’ current disapproval - and Andie came out globally before doing so in her own home.

Comparatively, Dennis’ coming out process was much different than most in the sample: he had come out after being married and fathering children.
Nonetheless, much like his IGBP counterparts, he was also subjected to parental disapproval: “My former wife has actually been surprisingly supportive. Now she is. 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.” It was precisely this lack of parental support that drove Dennis and others post videos and offer themselves as resources well versed in dealing with homophobic familial environments.

The combination of others’ past experiences in homophobic environments and current statuses as same-sex parents resulted in an intimate understanding of the importance of parental support for youth in crisis, and they jumped on the opportunity to provide support. Learning that some participants in an LGBTQ-specific suicide prevention project do not have parental support, and because of that felt compelled to offer theirs to others in a similar situation, was consistent with LGBTQ suicidality research: A lack of familial support can have detrimental effects on suicidal youth but support from others can help to fill this chasm [39]. Coupled with participants’ voracity for serving as role models was their panoptic desire to offer counter discourses.

5.2.4. “Offer This Message that is Contrary to What We Hear.” Participants endeavored to disrupt the “it gets better” discourse in two ways, by: 1) challenging the phrase’s hyperbole; and 2) changing the discourse about intersecting identities. Each disruption is explored below, beginning with how participants took aim at the project’s eponymous phrase.

All participants agreed their lives had improved with age, and only a handful outwardly challenged the project’s name or connotation. Among those that did, participants used their videos to challenge the phrase’s vapidity; affirm or explain how their lives are better now; or provide immediate solutions for how viewers could make their lives better. In doing so, participants strove to avoid gross generalizations about time alone being a cure-all, as they proclaimed others’ videos had done.

Some set out to challenge identity discourses through their participation. Because LGBTQ identities are frequently (mis)interpreted to be in direct conflict with others (race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, occupation, etc.), participants used the IGBP as a platform for challenging homo-, bi-, and transphobia everywhere, specifically concerning religion and occupations.

As clergy or parishioners, David, Deb, Joe, Kevin, and Sarah challenged mutual exclusivity endemic in religious rhetoric whereby being gay or lesbian is incompatible with being Christian or Jewish, and the IGBP was a much broader platform than they ever had to do so. Challenging a viewpoint expressed in Savage and Miller’s video and others’, Kevin spoke against needing to leave one’s community: “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.”

In addition to interrogating oversimplified claims of “it gets better” and the implausibility of religious LGBTQ identities, participants used the IGBP to draw attention to occupations known for being blatantly homophobic, such as Sam’s remark: “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.”

As with nearly any form of discourse, participants set out to challenge and/or change it altogether. In crowdsourced efforts like the IGBP, “crowdslapping” has become a semi-regular occurrence, which Howe defines as “the crowd turning against the crowdsourcer” [40]. In fact, an entire subsection of videos exist under the heading “It doesn’t get better” as do alternative projects (i.e. “Make it Better Project” and “We Got Your Back”). Thus, it was expected that some would challenge the IGBP connotation, and participants did so in myriad ways. What’s more, a tension between participants’ altruistic and self-serving motivations for participation also surfaced.

5.2.5. “I Felt Morally and Ethically Obligated” vs. “I Need to Do This for Me.”

Several participants asserted that their participation was something they felt compelled to do, such as Jordon: “That was something that I felt morally and ethically obligated to do.” Others spoke broadly about their intrinsic need to participate because of other facets of their intersecting identities, participation in other anti-bullying initiatives, ties to suicidality, or as Kevin explained, an obligation to ensure that YouTube-based gay representation “isn’t just the ‘you’re going to hell speeches’ from crazy preachers and the naked boys doing inappropriate stuff.” Often coupled with this obligation was a sense of urgency to upload videos as soon as possible because participants viewed it is life or death.

Juxtaposing this altruism were participants’ self-serving motivations. Posting a video was cathartic because it provided participants an avenue to show and gain support and to remove the weight of their...
own life struggles from their chests. As Gregory explained, “I need to do this for me.”

Indubitably there is an element of catharsis and narcissism in broadcasting oneself globally via YouTube despite participants’ explicit acknowledgement or blatant ignorance of that. The act of filming yourself and publicly broadcasting is predicated on believing you have something of value to contribute. In a project intimately tied to the often difficult and lengthy coming out process, many participants used the IGBP to vent. Yet, only Jill explicitly acknowledged the narcissism: “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.”

Few in the sample could be labeled “armchair activists” or “slacktivists” upon closer inspection, though some did speak to the ease of IGBP participation as a motivating factor. Uploading a YouTube video requires little more than a video camera, Internet access, a YouTube account, and a few minutes. Thus, the IGBP has drawn global contributions from self-described “Luddites” (David) and the “tech-savvy” (Kristin) alike. Some identified as “frequent YouTubers” who had created several videos prior to the IGBP. Thus, whether participants stated outright that the project’s format was conducive to their participation and was a motivation for doing so, low barriers to entry contributed to their motivations.

Whether participants’ motivations led them to one-way communication from behind a screen or attempts at being dialogic (i.e., offering additional contact information, etc.), many expressed participating to compensate for what was missing during their own tumultuous identity development processes, and their motivations were both altruistic and self-serving. Coinciding with rectification, others were motivated to participate because they did not see themselves within the IGBP compilation and deemed that problematic.

5.3. Media Representation

Participants wanted to challenge the stereotypes conveyed by the IGBP or mainstream media, and they explicitly stated not seeing themselves in it with regards to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, and geography, which prompted them to record videos. Each demographic variable is discussed in turn.

5.3.1. “Maybe a Sprinkle of People of Color.” Joe, Kevin, and Kim, who self-identified as Black, indicated that racial identity was a key contributor in their participation. Kevin stated that “something in it made me address the absence of African American faces,” further describing how his intersecting identities (specifically, race, class, gender, sexuality, and occupation) served as a catalyst for participation. 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. Rather, Kaali’s non-conforming gender identity and role model status drove her to participate.

The remaining 16 participants who self-identified at least in part as White did not reference race as a motivating factor. This oversight was not surprising given that most did not discuss race in their videos either [41], rendering the presence of “White privilege” [42]: no White-identified participant stated race was a motivating factor. Comparatively, three participants spoke of their ethnic identities as drivers for speaking out via social media.

David, Deb, and Lauren shared that they were at least Jewish in part, which contributed to their decisions to participate. Whether they were “made fun of for being Jewish before being made fun of for being gay” (Lauren) or affected by their parents’ subjugation to life in Nazi Germany (David) or familial and societal discrimination (Deb), participants’ ethnic experiences fostered a holistic understanding of prejudice and discrimination.

5.3.2. “Somebody Who Was Female but Looked Like a Guy.” Beyond race and ethnicity, participants divulged that their gender and sexual identities contributed to their motivations for participation. For example, Kristin and Sam sought to show varying gender expressions in the IGBP. Kristin wanted to debunk the myth that gay men alone are suicidal and challenge gay men’s dominance in the IGBP by offering a lesbian perspective. Comparatively, Sam’s masculine gender expression contributed to her desire to participate because she thought others could relate to the discrimination she experienced/s and draw support from her video.

For others, distinct elements within their sexual identities drove them to participate. Labeling herself a lesbian demisexual, “a person unable to be physically intimate with somebody unless having the emotional foundation of a relationship first,” Andie explained how her story could resonate with youth who are confused by their sexual feelings. Rafael asserted that the IGBP benefitted from displaying a variety of body images, including “husky bear types” like him, expressly to combat media caricatures of all gay men as physically fit and statuesque [43]. In
conjunction with racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities, age surfaced as another motivator.

5.3.3. “I Wanted to Talk from a More Distant Perspective.” Kile and Deb, who are in their sixties, commented that age was a determining factor in their participation. Kile recalled seeing “a lot of young people under 30 in the It Gets Better, but I just wanted to talk from a more distant perspective.” Others, such as Jordon, spoke about the importance of being close in age to the target audience to be relatable to them. Along with age, the geographic location in which participants grew up and/or came out also played a role in their wanting to reach out to suicidal LGBTQ youth.

5.3.4. “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 self-acceptance, more than half were from the South, specifically VA, SC, and AL. Living in the South was negatively associated with family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers’ acceptance. Born and raised in the Deep South, Joe revealed: “This is the Bible Belt, and I live in the buckle of the Bible Belt. People carry a Bible under their arms and a whiskey in the other hand; that’s just how it is.”

According to Joe, his racial, gender, sexual, and religious identities were intertwined with his locale, all of which were contributing factors to his participation. SC native Kim echoed Joe’s sentiment about the challenges she experienced growing up in the South. While the West Coast is more socially liberal than the South concerning sexual orientation, some participants’ experiences of growing up in WA and CA proved otherwise.

Undeniably, the negative impact that participants’ locales had on their identity development compelled many to vacate these spaces upon reaching adulthood and securing the financial means to do so - and led them to share their survival stories with LGBTQ youth. Coupled with mentions of their childhood hometowns were mentions of participants’ current environments, the juxtaposition of which offered additional insight.

With the exception of a few, most participants no longer resided where they were born or raised, which served as a contributing factor to participate in the IGBP - particularly among those physically removed from their homophobic environments (i.e., away at liberal colleges or universities; living in gay-friendly cities like SF, LA, or NYC; etc.). In juxtaposing her conservative VA hometown with her current liberal collegiate residence in MA, Abbie explained how her current locale was an impetus for vlogging. Whether they now lived in queer-supportive cities or were able to escape just long enough to film, mobility contributed to participants’ desires to reach out to LGBTQ kids who may not have the luxury of experiencing gay-friendly spaces.

Participants’ were compelled to change differing aspects of IGBP representation, but their strategies were similar: Be the visual diversity within the project. Changing mainstream media lesbian and gay depictions will take time despite significant advancements in the past two decades, but through YouTube participants have the tools to do so immediately.

6. Conclusion & Implications

Participants’ motivations for IGBP participation were multidimensional, and empirical data revealed their intersecting identities and the structural oppressions they were operating within contributed to them. As Collins explained, individuals belong to multiple groups and have multifaceted, intersecting identities. Depending upon the situation, one group membership may be more salient at that time, and both unique individual and group standpoints exist. For most participants it was salience of their sexual orientation and membership in a presumed “LGBTQ community” that took precedence over other identities, which ultimately led them to participate.

However, participants talked about their intersecting identities as tied to sexual orientation and race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, and geography throughout, although class was rarely discussed as a motivating factor. The impact of these identities emerged most explicitly concerning media representation, which included participants’ desires to challenge and change the IGBP discourse, the latter of which was done by taking aim at the eponymous one-size-fits-all message. Participants’ desire to change the media and the hegemonic sexual discourses it (re)produces was itself in reaction to the matrix of domination and structural oppressions. For older participants and/or racial, ethnic, gender, and religious minorities, it was a matter of countering existing stereotypes and seeking inclusion.

The impact of structural and disciplinary institutions extending beyond the media also surfaced as additional factors driving participants to share their stories. For example, participants discussed how their experiences of getting bullied and/or experiencing sexism and homophobia in schools, churches, the military, and other community institutions by adults in positions of power led to a sense of camaraderie with the IGBP target audience and a desire for rectification of past and present voids. Moreover, participants also discussed how their support systems were oppressive interpersonally, through driving
participants so far as to ideate or attempt suicide, neglecting to serve as role models at a key point in their identity development, and directly contributing to long-lasting internalized homophobia felt through others’ hegemonic discourses.

As a whole, participants’ intersecting identities and the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal oppressions experience(d) within the matrix of domination impacted them to varying degrees, as expected. However, among almost all who identified as Black, the matrix of domination’s impact appeared to be a stronger motivator than those identifying solely or in part as White. Interestingly, although all talked extensively about their intersecting identities and some acknowledged a broader matrix of domination, few discussed their racial, class, or gender identities within their videos, instead opting to focus almost exclusively on sexual orientation [44]. The impact of participants’ intersecting identities and the matrix of domination could not be determined from video content alone, rendering interviews essential for understanding motivations for participation.

Beyond adding to the dearth of strategic communication scholarship concerning motivations for participation in online communities, this study also introduces a relatively new form of academic interviewing (Skype and Google Hangouts) to the literature. Moreover, it offers several theoretical and practitioner implications as well.

Vardeman-Winter, Tindall, and Jiang asserted that intersectionality can help practitioners design more relevant campaigns, but this study demonstrates how it can also provide deeper understanding of why individuals participate in online communities. This study also reinforces the need for strategic communication research to shift away from a largely corporate focus on how organizations use online-based tools to speak at stakeholders and instead concentrate more on why stakeholders engage with organizations. The application of intersectionality to another facet of strategic communication demonstrates both the theory’s importance to research as well as to the practice: practitioners must be cognizant of their stakeholders’ intersecting identities to truly understand their motivations for participation. Furthermore, understanding of individual motivations is bolstered by understanding of structural oppressions. This combination of individual and structural oppressions has been shown to help explain why individuals participate in an online community and how they go about doing so, which is of value to both scholars and practitioners in their ongoing quests to understand, engage, and persuade their audiences.

7. References

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