

DIGITAL SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN TODAY'S LGBT NONPROFITS

By

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To my Mom and Dad

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my mom and dad for the continued support I received during this time. I would like to thank Dr. Linda Hon for her guidance and advice throughout this experience.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This qualitative study examines the use of social media in online activism for two LGBT nonprofit organizations' campaigns. This study analyzes myriad ways in which nonprofits utilize social media to effectively achieve goals, enact social change, and reach wide-spanning audiences. This research argues that digital social media are an excellent tool that should be implemented in today's nonprofit organizations. Examining transmedia mobilization along with six standards to determine the quality of social media, this study provides an in-depth analysis of successful social media campaigns.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

According to a 2016 study, approximately 10 million (or about 4.1%) of individuals in the United States identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (Gates, 2017). This number has increased from 3.5% in 2012 (Gates, 2017). The largest concentration of LGBT individuals is found among the millennial generation at 7.3% (Gates, 2017). The purpose of this study is to examine the social media used by two nonprofit organizations, the It Gets Better Project and the Human Rights Campaign, whose goals are geared toward improving the overall livelihood of LGBT individuals. It is vital, as this particular community grows, to examine the most effective strategies nonprofits can implement to ensure success both on and offline.

Activism

Activism is defined as a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action (Grunig, 1992, p. 504). It is not a new concept. However, the way activism has begun to be practiced in recent years is new. While activists still rely on offline activism to encourage social or political change, many are also turning to digital activism by using digital media to educate, inform, and promote their specific campaigns.

This study will focus on the effectiveness and challenges faced by two specific LGBT-focused campaigns conducted by two separate pro-LGBT activist groups, the Human Rights Campaign and the It Gets Better Project. The goal is to analyze how each group used social media to effect change in LGBT policies within the United States. The research presented will offer greater insight on how and social media can play key roles in the communication field.

Social media and their effectiveness within the communication field are still new areas of research. The use of social media as a means of communication continues to grow. It is

necessary to understand the trends, challenges, and successes within this area so that best practices can be applied in the future. This study will provide key examples of strategies that should be used in future digital social advocacy campaigns.

A History of the LGBT Community in the United States

The LGBT population in the United States has seen a rise in acceptance over the last two decades. Noteworthy successes for the LGBT community include: Nationwide marriage equality, the repeal of the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy within the military, and the defeat of the Federal Marriage Act to name a few. While the LGBT community may have more support than ever before, much can still be done to improve the climate for this population. According to a 2016 poll conducted by Gallup, “About 10 million Americans — or 4.6 percent of the U.S. population — identified as LGBT...” (Reynolds, 2017, para. 1; Gates, 2017, para. 1). This is the highest recorded percentage of LGBT-identifying individuals to date.

While gains have been made for the LGBT community, largely due to activist groups, such as the Human Rights Campaign and the It Gets Better Project, the quest for equality for gay and lesbian individuals is not a new phenomenon. The first documented movement for gays rights in the United States was founded by Henry Gerber titled Society for Human Rights, in 1924 (Breaking Prejudice, 2013). The society was chartered by the State of Illinois and published *Friendship and Freedom*, the first U.S. publication for homosexuals (Breaking Prejudice, 2013). In 1948, researcher Alfred Kinsey published his book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. His findings reported that 37% of men studied had participated in homosexual behavior, leading Kinsey to propose that sexual orientation spans across a spectrum (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1998). By 1953, homosexuality was still considered to be taboo. President Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450 that year, which ordered the dismissal of governmental employees who engage in sexual perversion. Homosexuals are not directly mentioned but as a result, hundreds of

gay and lesbian individuals lost their jobs (Howard, 2012). The Stonewall Riots, named for the Stonewall Inn, a popular bar frequented by closeted individuals which was raided by police forces in 1969, is often cited a pivotal turning point in the fight for equality (Breaking Prejudice, 2013). The American Psychiatric Association concluded in 1973 that homosexuality is not a mental illness (Bayer, 1987). But, it was not until the late 1990s that major improvements could be observed for the LGBT community. After President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, which defined a marriage as a union between one man and one woman, California adopted a domestic partner law in 1999. The law allowed same-sex couples the same equal rights, responsibilities, benefits, and protections as married couples (Breaking Prejudice, 2013). In 2000, Vermont became the first state to legalize civil unions, followed by Massachusetts in 2004, which became the first state to recognize same-sex marriage. In 2013, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the key parts of DOMA are “unconstitutional and that gay couples are entitled to federal benefits such as Social Security survivor benefits and family leave” (Breaking Prejudice, 2013, p. 39).

If an individual compared the support for gay and lesbians in 2017 to the support from 50 years ago, it would be obvious that the overall climate has improved for LGBT acceptance in general, but by how much? A study conducted by Lewis (2011) examined various demographics and the amount of support these groups hold toward LGBs. It should be noted that Lewis’ work did not include transgendered individuals. The studied found that regardless of the demographic, support for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals increases when individuals personally know someone in the LGB community (Lewis, 2011). The results supported the hypothesis that knowing LGBs creates more tolerance among others for all policy issues (Lewis, 2011, p. 231). The study also noted the rise in percentages of heterosexuals knowing an LGB within the last century (Lewis,

2011). “Only 14 percent of those born before 1910 know LGBs compared with the 45 percent of those born in the 1940s and 56 of those born in the 1980s” (Lewis, 2011, p. 225). These results support the notion that if groups want to raise awareness and acceptance, they must demonstrate that their group is a valid portion of a specific population.

In another study, Hettinger and Vandello (2014) analyzed the support for gay rights compared with positive versus negative stereotypes. These researchers compared the amount of support heterosexuals held for gays and lesbians against the Just World Belief theory and the Gay Affluent myth. The Just World Belief theory (Lerner, 2013) “suggests that people are motivated to see the world in a way that reinforces their belief that people ‘get what they deserve’” (Hettinger & Vandello, 2014, p. 447). This theory, combined with the notion that gays are better off than straight individuals and therefore do not require any additional benefits or rights, resulted in some interesting findings. Hettinger and Vandello (2014) found that heterosexual individuals who believed that gay people were better off financially were less likely to support legislation in support of LGBTs. This finding supports the hypothesis that certain positive stereotypes can negatively affect the support of specific populations (Hettinger and Vandello, 2014).

It Gets Better Project

Bullying is a topic that continues to be a high priority in schools across the nation. As of 2013, there were approximately 25,013,000 students ages 12 through 18 in the United States (Lessne & Cidade, 2015). Of that total number, 5,386,00 or 21.5 percent report experiencing some form of bullying in person and another 6.9 percent report experiencing cyberbullying (Lessne & Cidade, 2015). These numbers jump to a much higher rate when LGBT youth are specifically looked at.

An online survey conducted in 2013 by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2014) examined indicators of negative school climate and levels of access to LGBT-related resources in schools. A total of 7,898 students ranging in age from 13 to 21 from 2,770 unique school districts completed the survey. Students were from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. About two thirds of the sample (68.1%) was White, slightly less than half (43.6%) was cisgender female, and over half identified as gay or lesbian (58.8%) (GLSEN, 2014). The GLSEN study found 74.1% of LGBT youth had experienced verbal harassment and 49% had experienced online harassment (2014). The effects of victimization for LGBT youth include: LGBT youth are more than three times as likely to miss school, have lower GPAs compared to their heterosexual classmates, and have higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem (GLSEN, 2014). LGBT youth are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide as their non-LGBT peers (Mellin & Hinojosa, 2011).

The devastating reality of these statistics gained national attention with a string of youth suicides in 2010 that were believed to have occurred, in part, to harassment due to assumed sexual orientation. These suicides caught the attention of Dan Savage, a syndicated columnist and political commentator, who is gay. Savage, and his partner, Terry Miller, posted their own video to the social media site, YouTube, which included their personal stories about being bullied as teens and how life has improved for them since graduating from high school.

According to a *NY Times* article (Stelter, 2010), Savage explained his idea to make a YouTube video geared toward LGBT adolescents, stating that “helping gay adults realize that it’s gotten better for us,” but that “for teens, it’s been getting worse out in the boonies, in the exurbs” (para. 13). Savage went on to discuss how he had spoken at colleges often, but never at middle or high schools. He felt he would never get permission. While blogging about a particular

youth suicide, Savage realized “I was waiting for permission that — in the era of YouTube, Twitter, Facebook — I didn’t need anymore” (para. 16). The following day, after uploading the initial video, Savage received dozens of videos from across the country. By the end of the week over 200 videos had been uploaded, along with countless e-mails from teens, adults, and mothers and fathers of LGBT children thanking Savage for the project he had started (Savage, 2010a).

According to the project’s website, ItGetsBetter.org (2016), the It Gets Better Project has become a global movement. Over 50,000 YouTube videos have been uploaded with over 50 million views in total. The videos have been uploaded by many types of individuals including celebrities, politicians, artists, athletes, and people who simply wanted to share their personal narrative for how life has improved for them. The videos are not limited to individuals who identify as LGBT but also focus on allies who support the LGBT community.

The It Gets Better Project has grown from mere YouTube support videos to a global activist group fighting for equal rights for and acceptance of the LGBT community. However, Savage and his movement have faced criticism and backlash. In 2014, Travis Van Horn, a student and openly gay man, wrote a piece criticizing Savage for creating “a false reality of hope that exacerbates the heteronormative patriarchy and magnifies oppression against the queer community” (Van Horn, 2014, p. 2). Van Horn’s main point is that Savage relies on his wealthy, successful, white male status as an example that can be applied to the entire LGBT community, when it cannot. Other authors and scholars have criticized the It Gets Better Project and will be discussed more in depth throughout this study.

Human Rights Campaign

Steve Endean founded the Human Rights Campaign in 1980. It was one of the first gay and lesbian political action committees in the United States. In 2017, the Human Rights Campaign has a combined force of over 1.5 million supporters and members, according to its

website (www.HumanRightsCampaign.org), making it one of the largest LGBT advocacy groups in the world.

In March 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court began hearing arguments for two cases surrounding marriage equality. The first case, *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, was set to determine whether California's controversial Proposition 8 was constitutional. Prop 8 declared that marriage was between one man and one woman. The second case, *States v. Windsor*, set out to determine the constitutional fate of the Defense of Marriage Act, otherwise referred to as DOMA. Last, the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case was a collection of six lower-court cases that centered on the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. The final case will be the prominent focus of this study as it was that case that ultimately brought about the constitutional mandate of marriage equality.

Weeks prior to the Court hearings the Human Rights Campaign launched a social media campaign geared toward supporters of marriage equality who could not come to Washington, D.C., in person to protest. The idea was simple; change your Facebook profile picture to the Human Rights Campaign's logo that was specifically designed to support marriage equality. The Human Rights Campaign used its traditional (and highly recognized) logo-- a navy background and yellow equal sign, but altered it to show a red background with a pink equal sign. "Support for marriage equality is growing every day, but this one simple image gave countless millions a straightforward way to show their support for this civil rights cause—many for the very first time," said the Human Rights Campaign President Chad Griffin (Lee, 2013, para. 2).

The Marriage Equality campaign, along with the Human Rights Campaign itself, did not go without its fair share of criticism. Within days of the campaign launch *Huffington Post* Journalist Derrick Clifton, wrote a scathing article calling out the Human Rights Campaign and

its true intentions. Clifton made claims that the Human Rights Campaign only truly supports the affluent, wealthy, white gay and lesbian community. Similar to Van Horn's criticism of the It Gets Better Project, Clifton pointed out that the Human Rights Campaign continuously leaves out trans-men and women in their fight for equality and does little in the way of fighting to end racism for people of color, even in the LGBT community. "Racial justice (or even an allusion to it) isn't even listed on their website's 'issues' tab as part of a broader strategy" (Clifton, 2013, para. 12). Others also wrote pieces describing the lack of consistency witnessed within the Human Rights Campaign's strategies and tactics that will be discussed further throughout this study.

Social Media Use Throughout Each Campaign

Digital media were dominant tools used in a variety of ways by the two campaigns. The most popular social media platforms, at least in the United States, were used almost daily as a way to disseminate multiple messages. Initially, YouTube was the platform most used by the It Gets Better Project, as that was the avenue used to create video content and messaging. As the Project grew, however, an Instagram account, Twitter account, and Facebook account were created to reach a variety of supporters. These platforms were also created as a way to ensure that content was constantly available.

Blue State Digital, a global creative agency, saw the potential for success with the It Gets Better project and sought to offer its services to further the project.

According to its own website:

Blue State Digital partnered with It Gets Better to create the infrastructure that would direct a big cultural moment toward creating lasting change. We built a digital platform and clearinghouse to help the organization extend its reach, make the movement last longer, and build capacity to drive concrete fundraising and advocacy outcomes (BlueStateDigital.com, 2010, para. 2).

Blue State Digital made it a goal to ensure that the website created for Savage's movement could be more than just a place to upload more video content. The site was created to inspire more people to get involved, on an interactive platform, to show support for the LGBT community. Blue State Digital's own website reiterates that the It Gets Better Project's site was "designed for action" and "mobilized to spread hope" (BlueSateDigital.com, 2010).

Digital media were also used as dominant tools within the Human Rights Campaign. To date, the Human Rights Campaign utilizes an active Facebook page, Instagram account, Twitter account, Google Plus page, Pinterest page, and a homepage. Each social media platform is updated almost daily with varying amounts of information. The posts on these social media pages consist of relevant news updates, including LGBT laws being passed, government officials who are running and either support or oppose LGBT rights, LGBT friendly events, etc. Other notable types of posts consist of LGBT couples or families who are thriving.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Transmedia Mobilization

Transmedia mobilization is a relatively new term first coined by Constanza-Chock in 2010. According to Constanza-Chock (2010), the term combines the concept of transmedia storytelling and transmedia activism (Srivastava, 2009):

Transmedia mobilization is a process whereby a social movement narrative is dispersed systematically across multiple media platforms, creating a distributed and participatory social movement ‘world,’ with multiple entry points for organizing, for the purpose of strengthening movement identity and outcomes, (Constanza-Chock, 2010, p. 115)

Transmedia mobilization is not stable or constant but adjusts as needed to the digital climate it is used in. It allows for multiple users of varying power to access the same information and allows for voices to be heard beyond traditional media platforms. It provides a never-ending ebb-and-flow of exchanging ideas, narratives, and opinions that can all occur in the vast digital media world (Constanza-Chock, 2010).

Transmedia mobilization is not a singular term. In fact, transmedia mobilization engulfs a wide range of terms that fall under the transmedia mobilization umbrella. For example, *transmedia storytelling* involves relaying pieces of an individual’s story over a wide range of digital media platforms to contribute to larger, collective story (Jenkins, 2011). Within transmedia storytelling the narrative can be presented in one of two ways-- *radical intertextuality*, where a story moves across textual structures within the same medium, or *multimodality*, where specific pieces of a story are spread over various media outlets, noting the affordances of each (Jenkins, 2011). Transmedia mobilization entails “co-creation and collaboration” by a variety of individuals with an organization, which can help in consciously creating a “shared identity by the movement’s social base” (Soriano, 2016, para. 2).

Social Media

Any media that allow people or groups to interact with one another can be labeled as social media in the broadest sense of the term. Human beings have been social creatures since the earliest beginnings. Long before the advent of social media platforms such as Facebook, the Internet was still capable of performing similar functions online. Social media occurred once organizations determined how to bring together what individuals were doing across the World Wide Web into a collective space (Baym, 2015).

Today, social media are a group of Internet-based applications which build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It should be noted that social media is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of terms. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) determined six categories that collectively define social media: blogs, collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), content communities (e.g., YouTube), virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life), and virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft). This study will focus predominantly on social networking sites (SNS) and content communities.

Virtual Content Communities

As Mueller (2011, p. 271) explained, “Communities are the building blocks of greater society, and the development of new technologies has led to a re-evaluation of the ways in which communities are formed and how they function.” Beginning around the seventeenth century, the term community grew to include not only groups that shared a similar location, but also groups of people who held similar ideas, or something in common (Renninger & Shumar, 2002). These commonalities could consist of the same religion, sex, gender, political affiliation, etc.

The term virtual community appears to have been first used by Rheingold, who writes, “People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our

bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries" (Rheingold, 1994, para. 14). Lazakidou (2012) described virtual communities as groups that collaborate, discuss issues, share experiences and request support by using telecommunication technologies. He went on to write about the importance of *social relationships* within virtual communities. Social relationships consist of "repeated interaction between two persons" in which the interaction is "influenced by previous interactions as well as the expectation of future interactions" (Lazakidou, 2012, p. 3). Combined, these terms create a *virtual relationship*, which is created when first contact between two individuals or groups takes place online (Lazakidou, 2012).

It should be noted that virtual communities or organizations must be able to anticipate the rapid changes that occur within the realm of social media to ensure success. Both "completeness and evolvability" of virtual communities within social media platforms have been shown to indicate the potential for success and growth (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016, p. 17). Virtual organizations occur in dynamic environments wherein the likelihood of survival is determined based on the organization's ability to adapt accordingly (Kisielnicki, 2002).

Bonding and Bridging

Bonding and bridging are two components relevant to social media that come out of social capital. *Bonding* refers to "the interpersonal solidarity that is often present among people who associate in small groups, local communities, and other settings over extended periods of time" (Wuthnow, 2002, p. 670). Bonding typically consists of a smaller range of backgrounds, yet yields greater depth and stronger relationships compared to bridging. Bonding can be summarized as groups of individuals who already share common interests, who come together to discuss those interests more in depth.

Bridging is formed when people or groups from different backgrounds establish relationships through various social networks that emphasize a commonality (Kim et al., 2013). Bridging “plays a vital role because it promotes a sense of civic responsibility and encourages tolerance and cooperation that may be useful for addressing large-scale social problems” (Cao et al., 2013, p. 1673).

Bonding and bridging, while separate entities, must be used together in order to achieve the greatest amount of success. A recent study determined that bonding has a positive and significant impact on bridging (Cao et al., 2013).

Quality and Quantity of Information

The Cao et al. (2013) study emphasized the importance of the quality *and* quantity of the information being shared within virtual communities. The quality of information can be measured with six items: relevance, ease of understanding, accuracy, completeness, reliability, and timeliness (Cao et al., 2013). The quantity of information simply refers to the amount of information provided during a given amount of time.

Participation, Engagement, and Evidence

The creation of social media is simply the latest technological transformation that alters the way information is produced, transferred, and consumed (McPherson, 2014). Through social media, users can modify, share, and reuse content by any means they feel necessary, regardless of the intentions of the original message (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016). McPherson (2014) analyzed the effectiveness of social media through two separate theological lenses. McPherson (2014) states that two models specifically determine the effectiveness of social media used by NGOs, the evidence and engagement model. McPherson concluded that the key information value for the evidence model is the veracity of the information’s metadata, which can often be a

hindrance for social media due to the difficulty of verifying information. In contrast, participation is key within the engagement model, as the affordances facilitate participation and the evaluation of participant volume using digital analytics (McPherson, 2014).

Once again, the quality versus quantity of information provided by an organization becomes crucial. The quality of information is generally thought to be more effective. However, the quantity of participation is useful because it demonstrates the amount of supporters' interest in a given advocacy campaign (McPherson, 2014). With the advent of social media, organizations now have access to a number of analytic tools that provide real-time data specifically focused on both interest and participation within a given campaign.

Based on the research literature and background information about the two campaigns, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: What themes were apparent within each campaign?

RQ2: What were the measurable outcomes that occurred from these campaigns?

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

For this qualitative study, primary research was collected for each campaign to identify the common themes. This study also examined statistical evidence provided through secondary sources. Relevant statistics centered around two topics: support (or lack thereof) for marriage equality and the number of LGBT youth suicides spanning from 2010 to 2017. Other information that was analyzed focused on support for LGBT youth across the nation, legislation presented in favor of LGBT equality rights, and overall changes in attitude for or against the LGBT community.

The social networking site, Facebook, and video-sharing site, YouTube, were the two platforms analyzed. Transcripts of each video were used for the analysis to identify common themes. During data analysis, the themes were organized from the most prominent to the least. Research also examined the organizations' websites and the media coverage that surrounded the campaign to document evidence of measurable outcomes.

The researcher looked at Facebook posts that fall during two specific dates, March 2013 and June 2015, for the Human Rights Campaign. These dates were relevant for two distinct reasons: March 2013 was the launch date for the marriage equality campaign, as it coincided with the Supreme Court decision. June 2015 was the historical time that marriage equality was passed nationwide. By choosing these specific dates, this research documented outcomes and changes.

The researcher selected the social media posts that fell within that timeframe and, specifically mentioned the #lovewins and #unitedformarriage hashtags, and marriage equality. The most relevant 25 posts from each timeframe were analyzed.

For the It Gets Better Project, the study focused on the organization's YouTube channel. Using the YouTube-enabled search criteria, two specific timeframes were identified. The researcher examined 20 YouTube-provided transcripts videos posted by various supporters within the first two years of the project's start date, September 2010. A second analysis was conducted that centered on the 20 most relevant videos posted between 2014 and 2016, or approximately five years after the start of the Project. The purpose of the second analysis was to determine if there were distinct differences between the earliest videos compared with ones that were posted at a later date. Again, this differentiation gave a deeper representation of the measurable changes and outcomes. The 20 were selected to be as representative as possible of the various demographic categories of people who post to the site.

Each organization is visible on a global scale. With that in mind only Facebook posts and YouTube videos presented in English were analyzed. However, data collection was not limited to posts and videos from the United States. Any post or video in English that met the necessary criteria above was used. See Appendix A for sample posts and video transcripts.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

It Gets Better Project Themes

The videos created for the It Gets Better Project span in production value. Some were professionally created; usually the videos featured organizations or celebrities. Most videos, however, were made by individuals from around the world using a cell phone, webcam, or other hand-held recording device.

Unsurprisingly, the largest theme observed over the course of this research was one centered on life getting better. Most YouTube videos ended with the phrase, “It gets better.” One of the first videos analyzed for this research *only* discussed the notion that life will inevitably get better. The video lasted less than a minute, but the message was clear. The messenger, Megan Karbley, simply states, “I just want to let you know that it does get better out there” (Megan Hargroder, 2010). Karbley’s tone is almost pleading.

Many users began their videos by describing their personal struggles during adolescence. By doing so, users allowed those watching to see that they are not the only ones who had experienced difficulties. For example, in a video uploaded by the Kansas City Carnivores Rugby Football Club (a team made up of predominantly gay men), a player discusses his struggles with being an Asian American in a predominantly white high school, “I was made fun of on a daily basis. I was called gook and chink. High school was painful for me. I didn’t belong anywhere” (rbradck, 2010). The player goes on to discuss how after high school, and finding the Carnivores, that he enjoys the life he has today. He wants young women and men who are struggling in their life now to know, “There is a whole big world out there full of people ready to support you” (rbradck, 2010).

One video in particular stood out due to the age of participants involved. A Boston-based organization titled LGBT Aging Project created a video using openly gay senior citizens. During the introductory part of the video, David, an employee for the LGBT Aging Project, explains how he felt disheartened when he first came out because he was always told “that myth that all gay people grow old alone, lonely, and depressed” (LGBT Aging Project, 2010). The video transitions to several senior citizens who seek to give advice to younger generations of LGBT youth. Sheri, a member of the LGBT Aging Project, describes herself as “old enough to be your grandmother” (LGBT Aging Project, 2010). Using her index finger, in an almost scolding fashion, she instructs, “Look at me. I’m sitting here telling you, don’t do it. Don’t do it. It gets better. It does get better. You know what helps? A sense of humor! Have a sense of humor, laugh about things” (LGBT Aging Project, 2010). Echoing a similar sentiment, Sam, an 80-year-old member, says,

It gets better with age. It gets more respect. It gets- it’s funnier that I can laugh at some of the things that I’ve done. And my era was very difficult to be out, and yet I always found a laugh. I always found some humor. (LGBT Aging Project, 2010, October 19)

The LGBT Aging Project video was interesting for two reasons. It is often difficult to locate or find information about LGBT individuals in the senior citizen community. This video provides a unique perspective from a group that is so vital, yet so rarely heard from. This video is also one of the most positive videos in this study. For young LGBT individuals who struggle to envision what their lives could look like decades from now, this video offers a powerful example that life truly can improve.

James, a self-described fluid, bisexual, black male in his early twenties (Campus Pride, 2013), uploaded a video through Campus Pride, an organization that aims at improving the lives

of LGBT students in the college setting (Campus Pride, 2006). James is adamant about life improving in the future for LGBT youth:

It's okay to not know who you are because you have a lifetime to figure it out. That's why it's called an identity, not a *you*-dentity. That's what you can tell your people that say you don't know what or who you are. No one knows you better than you. I just want to tell you that it gets better no matter what and to not take that step to take your life in your own hands...Somebody is going to be there to understand. Your family may not understand but you can choose your family with your friends or your roommates if you're in college. No matter what, everyone has love and somebody can find love. If no one tells you, or you don't hear it very often just know that I love you and it does get better. (Campus Pride, 2013, October 7)

James is an ideal participant for the It Gets Better Project. He is relatable to a wide demographic due to his age, sexual and gender identity, and race. It can be inferred that James has dealt with personal struggles in his past, even if he does not state them directly within this specific video.

Suicide

As a cathartic component of the It Gets Better Project's videos, many users choose to share personal stories about their experiences dealing with thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts. While difficult to listen to it is not unusual that an organization, whose mission is to decrease the suicide rate among LGBT youth, would encourage the sharing of personal stories surrounding this topic.

One woman, who does not disclose her name, described her attempt at suicide and the events leading up to that choice. She explains:

I remember feeling like I was in a giant bubble where I could see everybody and they could see me, but I couldn't connect with anybody. I couldn't touch anybody and nothing that happened in the world had anything to do with me. It felt like I was already gone. Most things seem to happen in black and white. There was nothing out there that could make me feel like a part of things. And one day I took two bottles of Codeine and drank some vodka and I fell asleep and hoped I would never wake up again (JR Russell, 2010, October 1).

This users story is not all that different from others that were also shared. Many users mention feeling different, abnormal, wrong, weird, scared, sick, etc., prior to accepting who they truly were.

These video participants were not always focused on a single issue, such as telling viewers that life will improve. To the contrary, several videos discussed myriad struggles that individuals endured throughout their lives. In one example, author Simon Curtis, discussed two pivotal moments in his life involving sickness and suicide. In his video, Curtis talks about growing up in a Midwestern town where homosexuality was not accepted: “I was being told that what I was inside was wrong...I grew up with a lot of fear” (Simon Curtis, 2016). At 10 years old, Curtis was diagnosed with leukemia and had no other choice but to stay optimistic and “keep a smile on [my] face” (Simon Curtis, 2016). Curtis beat his cancer, and eventually came to accept that he was different, that he was gay. The summer when Curtis turned 18, he was outed to his parents by his older brother:

At which point they told me that they wished I died by the cancer I had and told me to leave the house. It was a few months later my mom attempted suicide and I was blamed for that suicide attempt. I remember going to see my mom in the ICU, and having her barely conscious telling me not to come home. (Simon Curtis, 2016, October 21)

Curtis’ story offers an alternative struggle that viewers would probably not expect. He makes it a point to note that suicide is not just something that affects someone on an individual level. Curtis ends his video by telling his viewers that his relationship with his family has since improved, and today he feels lucky to have a strong relationship with his parents.

Religion

Often suicidal feelings coincided with personal experiences involving religion and the struggle to balance being gay and religious. A prominent theme among participants who spoke

about their religion was they often felt excluded or wrong for who they were. Many mention trying to “pray the gay away” or using prayer to be “fixed.”

A group called USGA, or Understanding Same-Gender Attraction, an unofficial group from Brigham Young University, released an important video that centered on the topic of being Mormon and gay. According to the video, BYU has one of the most hostile climates toward LGBT students (USGA at BYU, 2012). The video features several students and how they cope and succeed with being homosexual and a Mormon. Adam Brown, a student, states,

I remember going up to a mirror in my bathroom and looking myself right in the eye and saying, “Adam, I think you’re gay,” and it scared me. It absolutely terrified me naturally because I truly believed in this church and feelings did not coincide with the church. I got super depressed. I was just really, really confused. I felt really alone. I didn’t tell anyone because I just felt I’m not worthy. God clearly doesn’t want you because he does not love gay people. (USGA at BYU, 2012, April 5)

Adam continues his message by telling the audience that he knows what it feels like to not be accepted and that they are not alone.

Another student, this time a young woman, also discussed her struggle with identity and being Mormon:

I knew that I was gay and that wasn’t going to change. I [prayed to] my Heavenly Father about it, you know, I asked him, I guess, if this thing about myself is okay. I never asked that before. I had always asked to take this away. I don’t want it. And the feeling I had, this spirit, the confirmation was so powerful for me. It was amazing to find this kind of peace. (USGA at BYU, 2012, April 5)

The video emphasizes the specific experiences that gay and lesbian students have who attend BYU:

I thought I was surrounded by homophobic people [on campus] that would hate me if they knew. A couple of years ago my sister told me she would never let a gay man watch her children because she said they were deviant and more likely to molest them. Today, she’s my strongest advocate and loves me and she tells me it’s better. It gets better, even on this campus. You might not know how to reconcile your Mormonism and your sexuality, but I want to tell you that there’s a space for you here (USGA at BYU, 2012, April 5).

It should be noted that BYU allows homosexual students as long as they comply with the honor code in place while attending the university (BYU Honor Code Policies, 2017).

Transgendered students are not explicitly addressed on the BYU website. However, a recent article was published that focused on a transgendered student and his experience at BYU (Levin, 2016). The article notes that the transgendered student, Claren, struggled to come out as trans on campus. “At least one counselor advised against it: She said, ‘If this is the direction you’re going to go, I can’t help you,’ and she dropped me,” (Levin, 2016, para. 20). “University spokesman Brett Crandall confirmed this policy in an email, saying, ‘Deliberately dressing or presenting oneself as a member of the opposite biological sex ... is an outward expression that is inconsistent with the university’s Honor Code’” (Levin, 2016, para. 24).

The struggle with balancing one’s sexuality and religion was not only found among Christian participants. In November 2010, a group of Gay Orthodox Jewish men produced a video highlighting their personal journeys toward acceptance. The video features several gay men, all approximately middle-aged, but they are not personally identified beyond a first name. One said, “The only time I ever heard the word gay was when I heard the Rabbi speak and talk about the terrible gays, the gay agenda and how they are...everything against the Torah and Judaism” (menacheminla, 2010).

Belonging

Over the course of this study, an emphasis on analyzing a variety of individuals was essential. This research avoided focusing on any one specific race, gender, age, or sexual orientation. In keeping with that goal, this study also analyzed videos with varying types of mood, or overall feeling. While many videos discussed the struggles faced in earlier life, some videos only focused on thriving, happy experiences.

In a video titled, LGBTQ Family Edition from Canada, viewers are introduced to a family where all three of the siblings are gay. The mother, Luella, describes her views on homosexuality prior to her children coming out: “My take on homosexuality or gays and lesbians before my children came out-- I didn’t pay a lot of attention to it. I just thought they were normal people with a different sexual orientation” (The Gay Men Channel, 2016). The father, Don, adds, “Our son Justin came out first. It was a surprise. In one sense we told him this changes nothing but it also changes everything” (The Gay Men Channel, 2016).

Human Rights Campaign Themes

The Human Rights Campaign set out with the goal to make marriage a legal right for all individuals when the #LoveWins campaign first launched in 2013. Beyond that measurable scope, the Human Rights Campaign was able to portray a community of people as normal, law-abiding, loving citizens. The Human Rights Campaign’s approach with the #LoveWins campaign was to take aversions to marriage equality (such as non-support based on religious reasons) and to turn those into positives.

“Love is love”

An argument against same-sex marriage that is often heard is marriage is between one man and one woman and that same-sex individuals cannot experience this. The Human Rights Campaign made it part of the #LoveWins campaign mission to prove this is not true. On March 27, 2013, Senator Kay Hagan spoke in support of legalizing gay marriage. In a photo posted on Facebook of Senator Hagan’s giving the thumbs-up gesture to a crowd of supporters, a quote attached read: “We should not tell people who they can love and who they can marry.” This simple, yet powerful statement echoes the underlying goal of the Human Rights Campaign and the quest for marriage equality for all. A comparable statement was observed in the comment sections of various posts. One states, “People don’t fall in love with people because of what they

have in their pants. They fall in love with people because of what is in their souls.” Another powerful sentiment makes the point that love cannot be boxed into one technical definition.

On March 26, 2014, a celebrity endorsement came supporting the Human Rights Campaign and marriage equality. In a snapshot of a handwritten note, singer and actress Beyonce Knowles posted a picture to her Facebook page, which was shared by the Human Rights Campaign that read, “If you like it you should be able to put a ring on it! #WeWillUniteForMarriageEquality –B.” The photo referenced one of Beyonce’s most popular songs at the time titled “Single Ladies.”

Religion

Religion is a topic that comes up often when discussing the rights that should be allotted to the LGBT community. The Christian bible is often cited as containing arguments against supporting same-sex couples. Some examples include:

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 - Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind...

Leviticus 20:13 - If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood [shall be] upon them.

Leviticus 18:22 - Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it [is] abomination. [King James Bible Online, 2017]

The Human Rights Campaign sought to show that both supporters of religion and people who work within Christian ministry supported the LGBT community, and by extension, marriage equality. In one post, dated March 27, 2013, the Human Rights Campaign shared a picture of a group of supporters in front of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. It is unclear from the photograph how many people were present during this assumed protest; the photo appears to show at least several dozen. The supporters of marriage equality held various signs displaying their beliefs and support for the LGBT community. Signs that are visible in the photo read:

“Everybody LOVE Everybody” with letters written in a variety of colors similar to a rainbow, a common supportive symbol used within the LGBT community. Another sign read, “Christians for EQUALITY” with a rainbow flag drawn next to the message. Other signs visible read, “EQUALITY NOW!” and “Familia es Familia.” The message that was posted along with the photo from the Human Rights Campaign stated, “PIC: Christians for Equality #UnitedForMarriage” The post obtained over 1,000 likes, 25 comments, and 162 shares.

It was not only individuals who identify as Christians who came out in solidarity for marriage equality. Members of the clergy united in March 2013 to stand for equal rights. A photo posted March 26, 2013, displayed two women “On their way to the Supreme Court.” The caption read, “ Andi Villasenor and Susie Hayward were pictured holding a sign that stated, ‘Another Christian clergy for Marriage Equality.’” Also included were the Human Rights Campaign equal sign symbol and a purple cross with a red heart in the middle. The photo indicates that Villasenor and Hayward are a couple and that one, or both women work in ministry. Showing the support of Christian ministry was a powerful tool for the Human Rights Campaign. Religious figures, similar to politicians, hold a higher status of power within their communities (Health Comm Capacity, 2017). The support for marriage equality by these individuals sent a positive message to members in their congregations.

Equality

Beyond showing that the average individual, and religious figures, embraced the idea of marriage equality, one of the most influential-type posts from the Human Rights Campaign came when the campaign focused on political figureheads who endorsed same-sex marriage.

Arguably, the most influential support came from the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama. Obama posted his own photo to his Facebook page, which was then shared by the Human Rights Campaign on March 26, 2013. The photo showed a candid black-and-white

photo of Obama looking out into the distance. It's assumed by this research that the photo was taken during the speech he gave supporting same-sex marriage and LGBT rights. The photo is accompanied with a quote by Obama which read: "Every single American-- gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered-- every single American deserves to be treated equally in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of our society." The photo was liked over 34,000 times, had 12,000 shares, and gained 524 comments on the Human Rights Campaign's Facebook page alone. The photo had an even larger reach on Obama's page. With his endorsement of same-sex marriage, Obama made history by becoming the first sitting United States president to support legal rights for the LGBT community.

The Human Rights Campaign did not have to rely on President Obama as the only politician who endorsed marriage equality. Mentioned earlier, in 1996 Clinton had signed DOMA, which stated that marriage in the United States could only be recognized between a man and a woman (Breaking Prejudice, 2013). On March 7, 2013, the Human Rights Campaign released an image of Clinton with an accompanying quote that read, "I join with the Obama administration, the petitioner Edith Windsor, and the many other dedicated men and women who have engaged in this struggle for decades in urging the supreme court to overturn the Defense of Marriage Act" (The Human Rights Campaign Facebook, March, 7, 2013). The image earned 12,000 likes, 4,200 shares, and 315 comments.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also released a statement in support of marriage equality. The image used included Clinton presumably making a speech with her statement of support attached, which read, "I support it personally and as a matter of policy and law, embedded in a broader effort to advance equality and opportunity for LGBT Americans and all Americans" (The Human Rights Campaign Facebook, March 18, 2013). The image earned

12,000 likes, 3000 shares, and 288 comments. Hillary Clinton's support was a similar gain for the marriage equality movement because she had previously released statements against same-sex marriage in 2004 (Biddle, 2015).

Humor

An important underlying approach that the Human Rights Campaign embraced with the marriage equality campaign was the use of humor. By using humorous posts, photos, and images, the Human Rights Campaign brought a bright, light-hearted tone to a serious issue. As with many issues that individuals feel strongly about, the Human Rights Campaign Facebook page was not immune from receiving hate-filled messages from anti-supporters. It would be counter-productive of the Human Rights Campaign to embrace or support violence against anyone. After all, the Human Rights Campaign emphasizes equality and rights for all people. The humorous posts were utilized as a tool to shift focus from hate and come together in positivity. These types of imagery created a sense of bonding between staunch Human Rights Campaign supporters and more casual supporters.

For example, on March 27, 2013, the Human Rights Campaign posted a photo-shopped image of American cooking-show host, Paula Deen, sitting on top of the large red-and-pink equal sign with the phrase "It's like two sticks of butter, y'all." posted above. The two sticks of butter is a reference to the two bars used in the pink equal sign. The use of butter as a comparison is in reference to Deen's infamous use of butter on her cooking show and in her food dishes. The image implies that just as butter never hinders a dish, equality does not hinder individuals. The post was liked over 2,100 times, shared 1,600 times, and gained 73 comments. While Deen has never publicly commented for or against same-sex marriage, the use of her image by the Human Rights Campaign was an interesting choice. The Southern United States were proven to be the least supportive area of the country when it comes to marriage equality,

gender identity, transgendered rights, and overall acceptance of the LGBT community (Margolin, 2015). The Human Rights Campaign made no indication that Deen embraced the use of her image with the marriage equality symbol.

In another post, shared the same day, the Human Rights Campaign presented a cartooned image of Superman, an American super hero. The image shows Superman holding up an extremely heavy object, like a piece of steel, and breaking it in half above his head. On Superman's costume, a red-and-pink equal sign takes the place of the famous large, yellow S. The caption that accompanies the image reads, "The man of steel steals our logo- and we're ok with it."

Measurable Outcomes

When researching measurable outcomes for this study, it was discovered that suicide rates are not grouped based on sexual orientation. This is not unusual, as sexual orientation cannot be determined the way sex, race, or age is determined. Instead, researchers compare the ages of those who commit suicide from the years 2010 and 2015 using the American Foundation For Suicide Prevention statistics.

Suicide rates have risen steadily across all demographics, even if just slightly. It should be noted that young adults ages 20 to 34 have the lowest suicide rates after individuals younger than 20. The highest suicide rate (19.6%) was found among adults aged 45 to 64 in 2015. Adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 24 had a suicide rate of 12.5% in 2015. Whites outrank other races considerably in suicide rates. In 2010, whites had a suicide rate of 13.5% that rose to 15.1% in 2015. White males are four times more likely to die by suicide than females. However, females attempt suicide three times more often.

An interesting finding was discovered when researchers sought to look at suicide rates broken down by individual states. According to a study by PunditFact, since 1992 Wyoming,

Idaho, and Alaska have voted for predominantly conservative politicians marking them as red states (Greenberg, 2013). Since 1992, California, New Jersey, and New York have voted more liberally and have been identified as blue states (Greenberg, 2013). Historically, conservatives have run on platforms that oppose the expansion of LGBT rights and privileges. Alternatively, the liberal party supports LGBT individuals and the expansion of rights. Wyoming, Alaska, and Idaho also happen to have some of the highest rates of suicide in the country; California, New Jersey, and New York have some of the lowest (Greenburg, 2013). It cannot be determined if there is any causation that exists within these statistics, but future research should study the correlation.

On June 26, 2015 the Supreme Court ruled by a 5-to-4 vote that the constitution guarantees a right to same-sex marriage in all 50 states (Liptak, 2015). Justice Kennedy issued the majority opinion in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court case. “No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were,” stated Justice Kennedy after the vote was released to the public. The ruling solidified the hard work and effort that organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign, had put forth for several years.

According to a USA Today article from June 2016, nearly 1 million U.S. adults are in same-sex marriages, a 33% increase since nationwide marriage equality was passed (Wolf, 2016). Support for LGBT individuals has been on the rise according to a survey conducted by the American Sociology Association in 2016. Across every demographic analyzed, including gender, education level, religion, ethnicity, region, etc., a consistent rise has been observed (Fetner, 2016). The study attributes a shift in acceptance of LGBT individuals to several possible

factors. Fetner points to older generations, who predominantly hold a more negative view of gays and lesbians, are dying, while younger generations, who typically hold more positive views, are becoming the majority (2016). Fetner also notes the overall cultural shift that the United States has adopted in recent years. For example, more television shows and movies are portraying LGBT individuals in a more positive light (Fetner, 2016). The study concludes with one answer that is believed to be the most influential: knowing someone who is gay: “Those who know lesbian and gay people in their families, at work, or in their neighborhoods, have much more positive attitudes toward them in general than those who do not know any” (Fetner, 2016, p. 27).

Only 19 states have anti-bullying laws that protect students by including sexual orientation and gender identity (Movement Advancement Project, 2017). Among those 19 states, only 13 have anti-discrimination laws based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Movement Advancement Project, 2017). While this is an improvement, as there were not laws in place prior to the 20th century that supported minority groups, there is still a great need for improvement. Ideally, both campaigns profiled here aim to have anti-discrimination laws in all 50 states.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Research determined that both the It Gets Better Project and the Human Rights Campaign promote an inclusive society that advocates for all genders and sexualities. Each organization was visible on individual social media platforms and each was a prominent force behind LGBT friendly legislation. Both organizations strive to implement best practices. The organizations are growing in size, both in supporters and in locations around the world. Each organization makes it a point to highlight a variety of individuals. The It Gets Better Project has numerous channels geared toward a variety of races, genders, couples, etc. The Human Rights Campaign highlights transgendered individuals, People of Color, and various ethnicities from around the globe to ensure that the organization is supportive for all.

Both organizations utilized digital storytelling, or transmedia mobilization, as a means to better reach their audiences. From its inception, The It Gets Better Project almost exclusively relied on this tool. Transmedia mobilization assisted each nonprofit by providing a more authentic voice for the organization. Whether a college freshman was pleading with high school freshman to persist in life telling them it gets better, or a photo was posted of two Christian lesbians getting married, transmedia mobilization aided in humanizing the LGBT community. Specific individuals who had experienced homophobia (e.g., bullying at school due to sexual orientation) or anti-gay legislation (e.g., being unable to be married to a same-sex partner) were able to put a face on an important issue. Both the It Gets Better Project and the Human Rights Campaign adapted to the needs of their audiences as each organization developed and grew. For example, the It Gets Better Project was first intended to be a small production, only reaching a few hundred people at most. It ultimately grew into a worldwide movement with over 50,000 uploaded videos and counting. The Human Rights Campaign also successfully incorporated

transmedia mobilization into its organization with the implementation of social media. The Human Rights Campaign was created prior to social media being readily available and relied heavily on in-person activism to initially encourage movement and momentum. It gradually, yet seamlessly, incorporated social media as its intended audience became more reliant on social media for information. Social media allowed the Human Rights Campaign to transmit stories of LGBT individuals to a vast number of people all over the globe within seconds from a single device. Apart from the sheer reach that each organization could achieve with social media, transmedia mobilization took faceless statistics and put specific people on the front line of the LGBT movement for equality. From a statistical viewpoint, one is more impactful than one million. Human beings can better identify and personally relate to one thing more easily than a million things (Taylor, 2016). At the root, the goal of transmedia mobilization is to take a statistic that would be forgotten and make it meaningful by putting a story behind the numerical data.

Transmedia mobilization can be incorporated with aspects of bonding and bridging (Cao et al., 2013) and the importance that those concepts play in activism. Bonding was observed, especially initially, within the It Gets Better Project mostly because bonding was an unofficial goal that Savage aimed to reach. Savage wanted to create a tool that could unite teens who may have been struggling with their sexuality and suicide and provide a space where they could connect. Eventually, the It Gets Better Project grew into an organization that included a variety of supporters, of all sexualities, races, genders, and beliefs. With the growth of the organization, bridging was observed when straight allies posted videos of encouragement and support for the LGBT community. Bridging could also be observed with regards to the span of participants who the It Gets Better Project brought together. A variety of cultures, languages, and backgrounds

collided into a single online space with a goal of promoting LGBT support. The Human Rights Campaign's use of bonding was less observable than the It Gets Better Project. This was mostly due to the broad scope the Human Rights Campaign aimed to reach. The Human Rights Campaign was not solely dedicated to the advancement of LGBT rights, but to every marginalized group, including women, racial/ethnic groups, etc. With such a variety of individuals, a specific bonding commonality was less likely to be possible. An encompassing commonality that could bond people together would be the goal of advancing all human beings. Alternatively, bridging within the bounds of the Human Rights Campaign was more obvious. Supporters from all types of backgrounds backed the Human Rights Campaign's goal to enact marriage equality at the national level. The Facebook posts highlighted celebrities, children, families, faith leaders, etc., who all came together for a specific goal.

The bonding and bridging components that occurred throughout each organization were able to succeed, in part, due to the virtual content communities that were established over time. One of the benefits of virtual content communities was echoed in Rheingold's (1994, para. 14) statement, "Nobody can punch you in the face but a lot can happen within those boundaries." The added benefit of safety was an underlying outcome for both organizations. LGBT individuals could safely express who they are without risking physical harm when they shared videos and images online. The virtual content communities that each organization created were a goal achieved in their own right. The sense of belonging and acceptance was key to the success of the It Gets Better Project and the Human Rights Campaign. The virtual content communities provided an outlet where individuals who felt ostracized could be welcomed.

With regards to participation, engagement, and evidence, both the It Gets Better Project and the Human Rights Campaign met the six qualifications for quality content. In all the data

provided for both organizations, relevance was consistent throughout. The posts and videos always related back to the campaign goal or topic. The Human Rights Campaign posted compelling images and text that was well written, thoughtful, and easy to understand. The YouTube videos that were created for the It Gets Better Project were almost always easy to understand, even if the participants rambled, misspoke, or became slightly off topic in their dialogue. Both campaigns had clear wording, such as, “It gets better” or “Equality for all,” that assisted the direction of the dialogue. The accuracy portion of the information provided was difficult to decipher with the It Gets Better Project, mostly because the truthfulness of the posted videos could not be determined. The Human Rights Campaign posted regularly about upcoming events across the country that could be verified. The Human Rights Campaign presented accurate information throughout the duration of this study. The completeness of the information provided within the It Gets Better Project YouTube videos was, again, difficult to verify as there were no specific guidelines that participants needed to follow. For this study, the researcher concluded that if the video posted discussed the focus of the organization (life getting better) then it was determined to be complete. For the Human Rights Campaign this research determined that all appropriate information needed to be provided in a post for it to be considered complete. Appropriate information might have included the time, location, and date for an upcoming event. If the Human Rights Campaign included specific people in its posted images, those individuals needed to be identified. Completeness was consistently found throughout each campaign over the duration of this study. Reliability was combined for the purposes of this study with accuracy. Both organizations posted reliable information when it was relevant to the causes and campaigns. Timeliness was also a vitally important component. Social media are a constantly changing environment so the timeliness of the information provided is crucial. The It Gets Better Project

continues to create new web content, such as a recent series titled, 'It Got Better,' which showcases various celebrities and their personal stories. Videos are still being created almost seven years after the initial launch of the project. The Human Rights Campaign posted on its Facebook page daily, typically several times a day. The posts would range in topic from humorous cartoons to updates about LGBT-focused legislation occurring across the United States. Collectively, both organizations provided high quality information for their audiences throughout the timeframe examined.

The It Gets Better Project and the Human Rights Campaign were chosen for this research in part because of the pro-LGBT message both organizations promoted. In many ways these two organizations share many commonalities. Obviously, both organizations strive for a fully inclusive society that benefits all types of individuals, no matter what their sexual orientation or gender. Both groups aim to decrease bullying and harassment, as well as remove any legislation that does not protect LGBT individuals and families. Ultimately, both organizations aim to normalize homosexuality. They seek to portray LGBT individuals as healthy, productive citizens who live lives just as heterosexuals do.

It would be impossible for these organizations to have universal support. Criticism of these nonprofits is not unusual and does not negate their validity or importance by any means. Identifying as LGBT does not imply that an individual is perfect and thereby free of consequences. The Human Rights Campaign and the It Gets Better Project portray the LGBT community as a group that is being treated unfairly and is in need of support. While much criticism of each organization has been proven irrelevant, one piece of criticism remains true: these organizations portray the LGBT community in almost a one-dimensional light, most notably as victims. This type of portrayal does a disservice to the LGBT community, even if the

intentions behind it are clear. And, it is more difficult to render support if the group in need is perceived as undeserving. Homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered individuals experience life the same way heterosexuals do. They experience failed relationships, they lose their job, they fail out of school, and they face any other hardship that human beings might encounter. These hardships are not always associated with being homosexual. Often times, these hardships can occur simply because they are human. Referring back to transmedia mobilization, both organizations are lacking a full picture of the community they strive to reach, and thus they lack complete stories. It is true that a wide range of individuals is represented throughout each organization, but the individuals are viewed from a singular viewpoint.

This study would be incomplete, however, if it did not address one obvious difference between the two organizations: the target age group. While neither group would ever exclude anyone based on age, it is clear that intended audience whom each group aims to support varies greatly in age. For the It Gets Better Project, teenagers and college-aged students were the primary audience. The Human Rights Campaign aimed for a middle-age audience, seemingly the age group that would be entering the workforce, getting married, and starting families.

Implications for the Public Relations Field

This study assists in the advancement of merging the public relations field with the nonprofit sector into a more inclusive area of study and practice. “Public relations in the hands of activists can bring about social change and social justice” (Holzhausen, 2014, p. 92).

Historically, public relations and activism were positioned as polar opposites (Grunig, 2000).

Public relations existed, in part, to manage crises that arose from activist and social movements.

However, Demetrious (2013) argued a “shift in activism has moved into a more central social space” (p. 78). Demetrious noted that the advancement of digital technologies will be crucial in activism and social change. “Public relations will have to acknowledge that NGOs and

community action groups have important contributions to make in the era of change and uncertainty” (p. 100). The research presented in this paper provides an in-depth analysis of the ways in which nonprofit organizations are utilizing digital technologies, specifically social media, to enhance their political and social justice campaigns.

Limitations and Future Research

This research has some limitations. The research relied on posted information exclusively. Interviews with campaign staff may have revealed different perspectives. The research presented, while extensive, is not exhaustive. For example, English was the only applicable language used in this study. YouTube videos have been created in various languages that were not included here. Finally, each organization analyzed in this study was not a singular entity. Both the It Gets Better Project and the Human Rights Campaign work with other organizations (e.g., the Trevor Project and the ACLU) to further their outreach and awareness. Therefore, the role that other organizations play in the success of these two campaigns is undetermined.

Future research should study the types of social media used by other nonprofit organizations, both LBGT and nonprofits with an alternative focus (e.g., undocumented students). It would also be beneficial for research to observe the data for the It Gets Better Project that are presented in languages other than English and from other countries to determine a consistency or variety of themes. Research could also analyze the effectiveness of other campaigns that the Human Rights Campaign promoted. For example, the Human Rights Campaign is promoting its #RepealHB2 campaign, which allows discrimination against transgendered individuals in North Carolina, along with #BeInTheKnow, which raises awareness surrounding AIDS and HIV among African-Americans.

While conducting the literature review for this study, several written works were analyzed that criticized both the It Gets Better Project and the Human Rights Campaign. Throughout the course of this study, the researcher analyzed the legitimacy of the criticism pertaining to each organization. The dominant themes surrounding each organization included: excluding transgendered and non-white individuals, promoting a heteronormative ideal within a homosexual relationship (e.g., a man, or masculine individual, with a woman, or feminine individual), and using funds to further an agenda that contradicts the ideals behind the organization. In terms of criticism specifically geared toward each organization, the Human Rights Campaign received a prominent amount surrounding the ties the organization has with donors and corporations who do not necessarily support advancing LGBT rights. More scholarship is needed to explore the validity of these criticisms and how the LGBTQ movement is (or should be) responding.

On a broader level, more research is needed to evaluate best practices with regards to storytelling and transmedia mobilization. Little research has been conducted surrounding transmedia mobilization since the term was coined by Constanza-Chock in 2010.

Conclusion

Both the It Gets Better Project and the Human Rights Campaign represent excellent social justice organizations. Each is a visible force, both on and offline, as well as present in United States legislation passed to improve the quality of life for all people.

This study adds to the theoretical body of knowledge surrounding the importance of activism and digital media campaigns. The research demonstrates the effectiveness of social media in the success of nonprofit campaigns. Organizations that insist on being accurate, relevant, reliable, and timely on and offline can be expected to have more successful outcomes. This research illustrates, however, that social media are not the only necessary tool that nonprofit

organizations should have in their toolkits. Rather, social media should be implemented along with a strong physical presence. Social media have made activism easier, in terms of the location and reach nonprofits now have access to, but it is not a substitute for the drive or passion of traditional offline mobilization

Transmedia mobilization will undoubtedly play a vital role in the future of nonprofit organizations. Storytelling, and the ability to widely share a spreadable message, have proven to be an effective tactic in the success of nonprofit campaigns such as the cases in this study. Nonprofits should incorporate personal narratives into campaign tactics. The personal touch creates a stronger sense of authenticity, truthfulness, and insightfulness, among other positive attributes.

APPENDIX
THE IT GETS BETTER PROJECT



it gets better: wisdom from our gay elders



LGBT Aging Project

Subscribe 220

138,260 views

+ Add to Share More

1,454 43

0:04 It gets better: Wisdom from our gay elders
Transcription Bob: Hi. My name is Bob
0:05 Linscott with Ethos and the LGBT Aging Project. I would like to share with you some
voices,
0:11 voices that are so rarely heard but contain so much wisdom and a lifetime of experience.
0:19 You know, one of the things that was really challenging for me when I came out was a
certain
0:25 myth that I kept hearing: that all gay people grow old alone, lonely, and depressed. So,
0:31 naturally, if you've heard that same myth your future is going to seem bleak or hopeless.
0:39 But, I would like to introduce to you a group of wonderful people who would like nothing
0:43 better to do than to bust that myth. Lawrence: Life does get better, and I know you may be
0:50 looking at me with this grey hair and saying, what can he say to me, and, what does he
know
0:59 about all of my struggles and problems? Well the truth of the matter is been there, done
1:05 that and here I am. Sheri: Listen to me. I am old enough to be your grandmother, and
1:13 look at me, I'm sitting here telling you don't do it t do it. It gets better. It does get
1:23 better. You know what helps? A sense of humor. Have a sense of humor, laugh about
things.

1:30 Ruby: So, I just love being gay. It's not an issue for me. It's just who I am. That
1:38 is my whole core. Sam: Look at me 80 years old it gets better with age. It gets more
1:43 respect it gets s funnier, that I can laugh at some of the things that I've done. In my
1:55 era it was very difficult to be out, and yet I always found a laugh. I always found some
humor.
2:02 Joanie: Life is beautiful and we're beautiful and we are family, so don't give
2:07 up. We're all here for you. Lois: What you feel at 13, or 17, or 15 can be very different
2:15 then what is going to ultimately happen to you. You're not going to be depressed.
2:20 You're not going to grow up and be old and depressed and alone. That's not the way it is
that's
2:25 the image that some people would like to project. Sheri: When I was 15 years old, I wanted
to
2:31 commit suicide and I even tried it. As I had the belt around my throat I said, Wait a minute.
2:40 this is crazy because I'm going get out of here, things are going get better, I'm going
2:44 to make it, things are going to be all right. And besides, I couldn't hurt my family I couldn't
3:02 hurt my grandmother. When I was 18, I left home; I joined the army and traveled all over.
3:12 In 1964 I met my partner. We've been together 46 years. I could only tell you that look
3:35 what I would have missed if I had taken my own life. Not only would I have hurt my
parents
3:49 and my grandmother, I would have missed out on all of my life living with Lois for 46
3:53 years, all of the wonderful things that we've done and I'm glad, I'm glad I didn't commit
4:04 suicide. Mel: I'm 66 years old and I lived most of my life in the closet, and now in
4:09 my older age I've come out, hung out, hung in there and life gets better. Actually, its
4:11 even been getting better for me now. Lawrence: I know, when I was a teenager 100 years
ago
4:12 I thought about suicide. I did more than just think about it I attempted it. But, I guess
4:13 luckily, I'm here. Because, after I got out of high school all of the sudden I saw a whole
4:14 new world. When I got into college, I found that there were people who accepted me and
4:24 me alone and that was quite amazing. Sam: I'm just happy to be this gay man that I am.
4:29 Lois: I m a very happy woman at 79. Ruby: I have more activities, emotionally, being
4:36 out then I think ever before. So, I have a very healthy libido Lois: Just put one foot
4:44 in front of the other. Jim: Watch Glee on television they're all having a good time
4:48 watching Glee. Ruby: It will get better. Take it from me, it will get better s guaranteed.
4:57 I've been through hell and back a number of times but, I held onto who I am and my gay
5:03 identity and I love my sexuality. So, whatever you do please be kind to yourself and hold
on.
5:11 Just hold on no matter what, it will definitely get better. Lawrence: Listen to me, it gets
5:16 so much better.



It Gets Better: Lt. James Young of the Orlando Police Department



It Gets Better Project

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Published on Nov 10, 2016

OPD supports everyone's right to be who they are. Meet Lieutenant Jim Young. Orlando Police Chief John Mina appointed Lt. Young as the agency's LGBT Police/Community Liaison. OPD is proud to contribute to the It Gets Better Project.

0:00 I decided to join the Air Force spent
0:05 four years in the Air Force during a
0:07 very difficult time for me because I
0:10 always knew that I was gay and this is
0:13 time long before don't-ask-don't-tell in
0:16 the eighties that's all gay friends who
0:19 were great employees in the Air Force
0:21 get kicked out of the air force for the
0:23 mere fact they were gay
0:25 I'm so it I otherwise excelled in the
0:28 air force's well that thing always
0:30 lingered on my mind that I could be
0:33 fired for being Who I out from a job
0:37 that I enjoy after leaving the Air Force

0:39 arm I knew I wanted to stay in law
0:41 enforcement but wasn't quite sure
0:44 because knowing that I was gay
0:45 this is still a time when ensure the
0:48 law-enforcement community accepted gay
0:50 and lesbian folks so I spent a couple
0:54 years in private business and then
0:56 decided to going to live my dream this
0:59 is something I've always wanted to do so
1:02 I joined an agency another agency here
1:04 in Florida spent six years there my last
1:07 year they're almost seven years there my
1:09 last year there I was officer the year
1:11 was on the promotional list to be
1:13 promoted
1:14 however I could still tell that there
1:18 was a feeling that maybe gay people
1:20 weren't accepted and in a meeting with
1:22 someone at the time I had heard the
1:24 comment made that basically if they
1:26 found out that they were gay people on
1:28 the department they would be fired
1:29 immediately I knew at that time that it
1:33 was time for me to move on so that fear
1:36 was real to me I decided to look at
1:38 agencies I done training over here in
1:41 Orlando in the early nineties and
1:43 something gave me that feeling that
1:46 Orlando was the place for me to be so i
1:48 applied here to Orlando police
1:49 department I was hired fairly quickly
1:51 here at Orlando almost within the first
1:53 few years I felt very comfortable about
1:55 being Who I am and identifying with
1:57 other officers who I am who are truly
1:59 I'm they saw me as a good police officer
2:02 I think you know I was involved in those
2:06 foot pursuit of bad suspects
2:08 arresting violence suspects are making
2:11 great around the biggest thing we
2:12 helping people in the community helping
2:14 those victims helping people who needed
2:16 help and it was at that time I decided
2:18 to really just start telling people who
2:20 you know that hey you understand who I
2:23 am that I'm gay and everyone was like

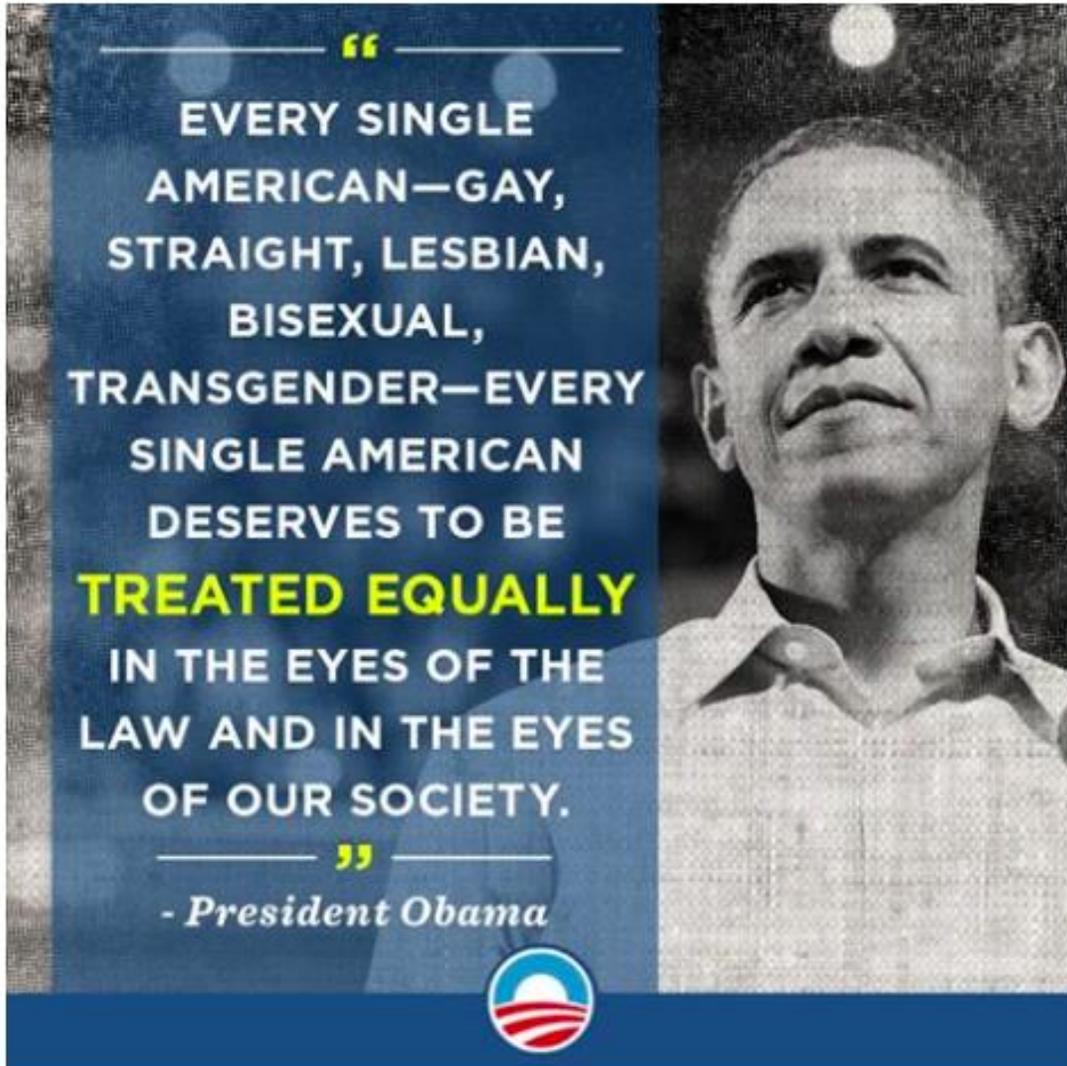
2:27 well great you're great cop so who cares
2:29 and that was the reaction from everyone
2:31 I got was your great cop so who cares he
2:34 it's it's unbelievable to see those
2:37 things happening and it's really
2:39 hard felt to know that that life gets
2:41 better it gets better

The Human Rights Campaign



Human Rights Campaign  shared Barack Obama's photo. 

March 26, 2013 · 



Barack Obama 

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Share this if you believe in marriage equality for all.



Human Rights Campaign with Rebecca Cole and 46 others.

June 26, 2015 · 🌐

LOVE WON: In a historic ruling, the Supreme Court has decided **IN FAVOR** of marriage equality in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Marriage equality will soon be a reality in all 50 states!

Add your name to the commemorative HRC marriage equality logo that includes **YOUR NAME** along with other HRC members' names who stood on the **right** side of history during today's monumental Supreme Court decision. hrc.org/lovewins

#LoveWins #EqualityForward #LoveCantWait



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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