

**CONSTITUTIVE RHETORIC AND THE RHETORIC OF HOPE IN THE  
IT GETS BETTER PROJECT**

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A Thesis

Presented to the

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

in

Communication

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by

Hishamuddin Bin Omar

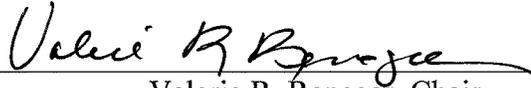
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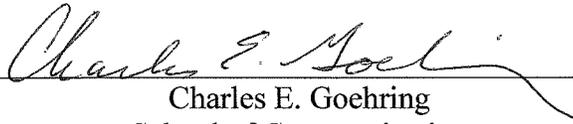
Thesis of Hishamuddin Omar:

Constitutive Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Hope in the It Gets Better Project



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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to all my loved ones, past, present, and future, who know me and accept me as I am. Writing about this topic is made that much more meaningful to me when I consider that they are the reason why I know what it means for things to get better. I would also like to dedicate this to all LGBT youth who have suffered discrimination, prejudice, or bullying in any way, shape, or form. They deserve better and it truly does get better.

## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Constitutive Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Hope in the It Gets  
Better Project

by

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Master of Arts in Communication

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Following a string of highly publicized suicides by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youths in August and September 2010, the It Gets Better project (IGB project) was launched in order to raise awareness of homophobic bullying in the United States. It has since received widespread media coverage, and this paper will highlight how the project employs constitutive rhetoric in the form of counterpublics, counter-narratives, and the click consciousness in community-building by constituting young LGBT individuals as being part of the broader LGBT identity. The rhetoric of hope is also produced as a counter-narrative that is present throughout this campaign. Together, these different forms of rhetoric invite marginalized LGBT youths to identify with the broader LGBT identity and feel connected with this community.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In October 2010, a Fort Worth, Texas city council person broke down while addressing his fellow City Council members. Instead of reading out prepared remarks or perfunctory announcements related to city administration, Councilperson Joel Burns opted instead to raise the specter of an issue that had recently gained prominence across the United States. “Tonight I ask my colleagues’ indulgence in allowing me to use my announcement time briefly about another issue that pulls at my heart,” he began (Burns, 2010). With a slideshow of pictures behind him, he launched into a description of several young people, identifying them by name and explaining what had happened to each of them. As he described how these teenagers had been bullied, harassed, intimidated, and threatened in their schools or communities, the topic of his speech soon became clear.

These people had taken their own lives because they had been discriminated against either due to their lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) identities or because they had been perceived as such. “There is a conversation for adults in this room, and those watching to have, and we will have it, that this bullying and harassment in our schools must stop,” said Burns (2010), and his desire was to “talk to the twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen-year olds at Pascal, in Arlington Heights, in Trimble Tech high schools or Daggett, Rosemont middle schools or any school in Fort Worth or anywhere across the country for that matter.” He wanted to tell these young people that it gets better. The video went viral, and Burns soon caught the attention of news media across the country. In his first national interview conducted by CNN, he said that he felt compelled to give that speech because this issue of youth suicides deserved more attention and that solutions were needed to overcome this problem (Simon, 2010).

He was not alone in this belief. His story was one among many that were told in the following days. When tragedies like these LGBT suicides occur, members of the targeted group can feel connected to the victims (Noelle, 2002). This ripple effect can cause vicarious traumatization and cause individuals to feel as if their stable worldviews are being

challenged. Celebrities, public officials, and other concerned Americans soon contributed to the growing body of work that make up the It Gets Better (IGB) project. Unable to prevent bullying itself, they channeled their efforts into reaching out to youths who had been the target of abusive treatment at the hands of their peers before. The message that these contributors were trying to impart is that although life may seem difficult now, particularly for young people who feel alone and marginalized, a community of people exist for them. Even in their isolation, there are others out there who collectively support them.

For this reason, I argue that the IGB project creates a community of support for LGBT individuals who have been bullied or marginalized. This process of creating community can be characterized as constitutive rhetoric. Through the process of constituting these individuals into the community, an LGBT counterpublic is articulated, counter-narratives are used to challenge the dominant ideology, and the moment of the “click,” which indicates when a person ‘enters’ this LGBT community is described. First, I describe the IGB project and discuss some of the coverage that it has received. Second, I articulate the theoretical framework of constitutive rhetoric, counterpublics, counter-narratives and hope, and the click that will inform this examination of the IGB project. Third, I analyze the rhetoric of the IGB project by providing specific examples of how these videos embody the three concepts and expand their conceptualizations. Finally, I discuss how this analysis contributes to rhetorical scholarship and how it can be used in future research endeavors.

### **IT GETS BETTER PROJECT**

Although the video by Burns (2010) is the campaign’s most well-known video, the It Gets Better project was founded by Dan Savage, a gay rights activist, columnist, and TV show contributor (Melnick, 2010). It is a YouTube campaign that catalogues videos by individuals in which they share their own stories about being an LGBT individual or being an ally of the LGBT community. These videos contain narratives that describe how being LGBT is not something negative or harmful, and that the current difficulties faced by LGBT youths pale in comparison to the positive future ahead of them. The project arose as a response to a string of highly publicized suicides by gay teenagers over a short period of time (Stelter, 2010). The names of these gay teens, including Justin Aaberg, Billy Lucas, Cody Barker, Asher Brown, Seth Walsh, Raymond Chase, and Tyler Clementi (It Gets Better

Project , 2011a), have become part of the movement against anti-LGBT bullying and homophobia.

The It Gets Better project has gained considerable national news coverage. The project has received more than 30 million views and nearly 10,000 video submissions since its inception (It Gets Better Project, 2011a). Additionally, a book on the It Gets Better project was released in March 2011 (It Gets Better Project, 2011b). Stelter (2010) noted that Fort Worth City Councilperson Joel Burns has become a much more recognizable face on the national stage. His video is representative of the IGB project. In Burns' (2010) video, he spoke of the difficulties growing up in a politically and socially conservative environment, how he survived, and the love and support that he has today. In a highly emotional scene, he described the torment he faced growing up within a conservative family and environment before talking about how things improved for him. Believing that change for the good would indeed come, he spoke about what he would do if he could communicate with his 13-year-old self:

And I would take – And I would take the 13-year-old me to just a few days ago at Baylor Hospital, to see our dad. Our dad who's no longer the 40-year-old tough cowboy that he was when I was 13, who I thought would never understand me. But is now the 67-year-old dad and still pretty tough cowboy, who's grown older and the 13-year-old me, would see me today, holding my dad's weathered hand and see my dad as he woke up from his operation and him squeeze my hand and look up at me and say, Joel, I'm so glad you're here today. And I said, I am too, dad, I am too. (Burns, 2010)

Although it may be said that LGBT individuals have gained some degree of acceptance in the mass media (Landau, 2009), it remains a fact that being LGBT or questioning and adolescent in today's society still comes with a variety of challenges to overall well-being (Tharinger, 2008). Portrayals of LGBT individuals and issues remain heteronormative and heterosexist (Landau, 2009; Liebler, Schwartz, & Harper, 2009; Mitchell, 2005), and homophobia remains prevalent in schools (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported that in 2009, "nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT students experienced harassment at school in the past year and nearly two-thirds felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation" (GLSEN, 2010, para. 2). Although they mentioned a decreasing trend in the use of homophobic remarks over the past ten years, experiences of more severe forms of bullying and harassment have not fluctuated much over the years (GLSEN, 2010).

The IGB project is unique because it produces rhetoric which acknowledges current difficulties while constructing a more hopeful reality. Although this “reality” may not apply to all LGBT individuals, the creation of these alternate realities can help the individuals identify with the group identity. The first video was created by Savage himself, who shared his own coming out narrative. In a video that he recorded with his husband, Terry Miller, Savage recounted how his life did get better over time despite the initial reservations of his strongly Catholic family and educational environment (Savage & Miller, 2010). Most of the videos follow a similar format, in which the individual or group discusses the issue of gay youth suicide before talking about their beliefs regarding how it will get better. Sometimes, they use their own personal narratives as examples to illustrate the challenges one might face growing up as an LGBT individual.

The IGB project features coming out narratives, traditionally a unifying factor in the LGBT community, in more visible and positive ways (Stelter, 2010). These videos have coming out stories that end well, even as they describe temporary difficulties that occurred following the process. Many of these videos also feature highly personal and sometimes emotional narratives, such as the video posted Joel Burns in which he recalled being told that he should “die and go to hell where I belonged” (Burns, 2010). Tim Gunn, the mentor in the hit TV show *Project Runway*, revealed in his own video that he had attempted suicide through overdosing when he was 17 years old (Stelter, 2010). Other videos, such as the one recorded by Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal church, are delivered in a more level, less emotional manner but are no less powerful for it (Robinson, 2010). In his message, Robinson spoke about how he is both a proud gay man and a church leader. Despite the different kinds of appeals, these videos feature coming out narratives in a way that is both positive and conscious of the visibility that the project has achieved.

An interesting critique has also been raised in the public discussion of IGB, charging that the proposed ‘better’ reality being discussed is unrealistic and unjustified. Nyong’O (2010), claimed that the videos represent the inability of the LGBT community to accept the fact that it does not always get better, and that the world does, in fact, cause marginalized individuals a great deal of grief. This critique suggests that the project resembles the salvific wish, which is when members of an oppressed population believe that members of the

dominant group will be more accepting of them if they act upright and moral (Jenkins, 2002). In this case, LGBT individuals are expected to just be more patient and remain unnecessarily positive, therefore acting ‘moral’ in the face of continued harassment.

Other criticisms have been raised regarding the IGB project and the consequences of its media coverage (Puar, 2010). Puar argued that the project over-privileges successful coming-out narratives at the expense of the realities faced by troubled gay youths—not everyone can reach the level of success attained by some of the prominent contributors, such as Savage himself. Puar added that it portrayed the suicide victims as nothing more than icons, sound bites, and martyrs. Furthermore, the project was said to have suppressed dissent and non-mainstream rhetoric by highlighting the perspective of the middle-class, white gay men who are presumably university-educated. Finally, Puar believed that the project lacks truly representative diversity of opinion and ignores critical discussions of how being LGBT intersects with issues of race, class, and gender.

These criticisms, although they expose inevitable limitations, should not overshadow the positive rhetorical implications present in the IGB project. For example, despite the arguments against the project that were presented, Puar (2010) was willing to concede that “it is no doubt crucial that IGB opened space for the expression of public anguish and collective mourning” (Puar, 2010, para. 3). What these criticisms lack is a discussion of how the IGB project works rhetorically, and I argue that the IGB project’s benefits should not be underestimated. Klein (2010) noted that the videos seek to empower their target audience by imparting a sense of agency. He argued that the videos collectively represent the idea that a person will one day be able to regain control over their own lives. What is implied by the IGB project is that there is no mystery in the assertion that it gets better, because the teenagers themselves will be able to construct a better reality one day. It is this mechanism of the IGB project that I uncover through an analysis of its rhetoric.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The IGB Project embodies constitutive rhetoric because it engages with LGBT counterpublics, employs counter-narratives, and highlights the click of LGBT consciousness. Constitutive rhetoric is rhetoric that addresses an audience, which is the moment in which a person experiences “interpellation” (Charland, 1987, p. 138). This is when a person is rhetorically made into a subject and is therefore being spoken to as part of a collective identity. An identity is not something fixed and stable, but is instead a constantly evolving concept that exists within discourses and texts (Dubriwny, 2009). It is also rooted in a historical narrative, and constitutive rhetoric seeks to position an audience as being part of this narrative. Once this happens, the constituted audience has to live out that narrative. Constitutive rhetorics are also ideological, “not merely because they provide individuals with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to experience, but because they insert ‘narratized’ subjects-as-agents into the world” (Charland, 1987, p. 143).

In the past, constitutive rhetoric has been discussed in relation to conceptualizations of ethnicities grounded in geography (Charland, 1987; Morus, 2007), racial identities (Bacon, 2007), national identities (Sweet & McCue-Enser, 2010; Zagacki, 2007), ideological or cultural values (Chase, 2009; Stein, 2002), and even the identity of breast cancer patients (Dubriwny, 2009). This research all centers on the creation of a communal identity that serves to unite different individuals. For the IGB campaign, children and teenagers were encouraged to persevere and understand that they are not alone within their various communities. Through identifying with this new subject position, they were also adopting the ideals ingrained within this collective identity. The IGB campaign allows for a constitutive rhetoric that is not limited to space or just one common identifier.

The IGB project works by engaging with LGBT counterpublics. Counterpublics are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). These counterpublics exist in “a

space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself,” acting as a “kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (Warner, 2002, p. 413). They are also “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public” imbuing members of a counterpublic with the “awareness of its subordinate status” (Warner, 2002, p. 423). Therefore, the counterpublic is structured differently than the dominant public and acts within its own set of guidelines.

Although a counterpublic can be defined broadly, there are a variety of beliefs as to what exactly constitutes its structure, its boundaries, and its functions (Gaonkar, 2002; Loehwing & Motter, 2009). While the concept was first articulated by Felski (1989) and Fraser (1990) as an oppositional feminist public sphere that acts counter to the oppressive structures of the general public sphere, scholars have since applied it in a number of ways. Asen (2000) described counterpublics as critical for shedding light on unequal power relations among different publics. The idea has also effectively described social movements that seek to counter dominant modes of thinking. A counterpublic can challenge the obfuscation of the root sources of a problem (Pezzullo, 2003).

Warner (2002) conceptualized a counterpublic as more of an abstraction of central ideas and discourses that make up a collective, and I seek here to expand on that version of counterpublics by focusing it more on the individuals who make up the group. Porrovecchio (2007) noted that “current conceptualizations of publics and their counters, both explicitly and implicitly obscure, or, worse, exclude discussions of the individual” (Porrovecchio, 2007, p. 240). I will also be looking at how people as individuals are constituted into a counterpublic. Furthermore, personal stories can act as a channel between the personal and the discursive space of the counterpublic (Porrovecchio, 2007). This is in contrast to DeLuca and Peeples (2002), who posits that society’s fixation with “bodily presence and face-to-face conversations” (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 131) has overshadowed the social and technological advances that have been made in the 20th century. They further claim that the interests publics have are mediated through public screens, such as television and the internet, which depersonalizes human communication. The IGB project merges these two perspectives and expands the scope of counterpublics while still highlighting the roles of individuals.

The LGBT community has been constituted as a counter public due to its oppositional nature to mainstream cultural values. This has occurred both through how it is expected to conform to normative expectations of intimacy and sexuality (Deem, 2002; Warner, 2002) and through its association with HIV/AIDS (Brouwer, 2005). Queer counterpublics possess shared public memories and can draw upon them to both honor their troubled past and engage with plans for the future (Dunn, 2010). The stories that people get from being part of the group identity work to constitute them as being part of a larger discourse. In order for individuals to identify with a collective identity, they must first tap into this historical narrative (Charland, 1987).

The IGB project also works by utilizing counter-narratives, or what Nelson (1995, 1996) refers to as counterstories. These texts are “narratives of resistance and insubordination that allow communities of choice to challenge and revise the paradigm stories of the ‘found communities’ in which they are embedded” (Nelson, 1995, p. 24) and seek to “disrupt stories of domination” (Harter, Scott, Novak, Leeman, & Morris, 2006, p. 6). Limitations that are placed on a group of people through the perceptions of the general public can be rejected and redefined by the stories that are told by those group members (Harter et al., 2006). Widely-held individual perceptions can also be affected by counter-narratives, especially when they are utilized effectively and cohesively (Dionisopoulous, 2009). This can be observed in the IGB campaign when counterstories were used to retell the lived experiences of LGBT contributors and their allies. They can be used to reimagine a situation and envision new possibilities or realities (Delgado, 1994). Someone producing a counter-narrative works from an other-perspective, “retelling the story in such a way as to invite interpretations and conclusions that are at odds with the ones the dominant story invites” (Nelson, 1996, p. 98).

These counter-narratives not only challenge the dominant stories but also work to build community (Delgado, 1994; Harter et al., 2006). Although counterstories work to “challenge the received wisdom” (Delgado, 1994, p. 230), they function like stories in that they create shared meanings and generate consensus within a group. This function is especially important here because counter-narratives can represent the collective voices of an outgroup. If “the cohesiveness that stories bring is part of the strength of the outgroup” (Delgado, 1994, p. 229), then it becomes important for a group like the LGBT community to

share narratives that unite their members. The telling of these stories can create an “alternative discourse community” (Harter et al., 2006, p. 5), ultimately serving to unite, empower, and mobilize group members.

The counter-narratives also serve to produce rhetoric of hope. Hope as a communicative concept has been conceptualized as “an alternative form of social discourse through which communities of people (1) generate new images of possibility for social relationship, and (2) mobilize the moral and affective resources necessary to translate image into action and belief into practice” (Ludema, Wilmot, & Srivastva, 1997, p. 1027). The daily communicative endeavors of human beings can act as “textured vocabularies of hope” (Ludema et al., 1997, p. 1016), which are “linguistic constructions that create new images of positive relational possibility, illuminate fresh avenues for moral discourse, and expand the range of practical and theoretical resources available for the construction of healthy social and organizational relationships” (Ludema et al., 1997, p. 1021). These can arise from sources such as “personal narratives, rhetorical speeches, stories told in the classroom, boardroom, or around the kitchen table” (Ludema et al., 1997, p. 1022).

The reason why this rhetoric of hope is important for the creation of community is because it serves as a “binding force of community” (Ludema et al., 1997, p. 1033). Although usually positioned as a psychological construct, hope can be theorized as a practical construct for community-building (Barge, 2003). Furthermore, the rhetoric of hope can unite people and, moving them to believe and care about a collective identity by inspiring them to “believe that we are more alike than we are different with a common destiny and a core set of values” (Atwater, 2007). A rhetoric of hope emerges in relationships and endures through our social endeavors. When narrating the positive moments in their lives, people begin to crowd out the negative aspects of their stories and can then envision hopeful possibilities for the future (Barge, 2001). The effect can even be strengthened in a community when it is based on the realities or constraints of the past. When based on actual personal precedent, the rhetoric used transcends mere wishful thinking into providing actual, actionable hope for a community’s members (Barge, 2003).

Embedded within these narratives are moments that discuss the click of consciousness (O’Reilly, 1971), which is when the contributors identify as being LGBT. It is “the click! of recognition, that parenthesis of truth around a little thing that completes the

puzzle of reality” (O’Reilly, 1971, para. 5) in a person’s mind, the moment when “we have suddenly and shockingly perceived the basic disorder in what has been believed to be the natural order of things” (O’Reilly, 1971, para. 7). It is called the click because it is similar to having a light switched on in a dark room. Everything in the room becomes clear and things make sense with this new awareness of the situation at hand (Martin & Sullivan, 2010). Just as women had these epiphanies that led to a feminist consciousness (Baumgardner, 2010), so LGBT individuals start with the click before discovering the many ways in which their lives can be rich and fulfilling. This new realization involves a paradigmatic change in worldview, as the first click “turns on a thousand others” (O’Reilly, 1971, para. 8). For the people in the videos, these moments referred to when they came out not only to themselves but to the people around them, when suddenly they realized that they were not alone or that there was nothing wrong with them.

The click moments mentioned within the personal accounts are narrative markers that help to identify the instance of transition from an isolated individual to a member of the collective community. They are the turning points within the stories, serving a cardinal function within the narrative being presented (Barthes, 1975). They are “actual hinges of the narrative” (Barthes, 1975, p. 248-249), serving to move the narratives from presenting the problems associated with being LGBT to revealing how accepting one’s self and coming out can lead to empowerment and positive results. The contributors describe the moments in which they had their click and entered the LGBT consciousness, indirectly guiding the viewer with a to identify their own click moments. As the click consciousness is under-theorized within existing scholarship, I seek to delineate different types of click moments and their implications as rhetorical turning points in my analysis of the IGB project.

All the examples from the IGB project come from the fifty videos that have received the most numbers of views, based on the option to group them as such on the IGB project website. Examples were selected from these videos because they featured specific narratives that represented the different theories well while still being effective in representing the IGB project as a whole. This is not to say that they were atypical or unique in presentation, but rather that each highlighted a particular theoretical nuance with clarity.

## CHAPTER 3

### ANALYSIS

#### IT GETS BETTER AS A COUNTERPUBLIC

The main way that the IGB works is through the creation and elaboration of an oppositional identity. These videos do not merely impart stories to the intended audience. Instead, they \ define what it means to be LGBT and the shared experience of knowing what it means to suffer as a result of it. In sharing his story, actor Chris Colfer of the TV show *Glee* said, “I know what it’s like to be bullied and teased every single day, and I know that it may seem like there is no chance of happiness left” (Colfer, 2010). An individual can be forced into a counterpublic, such as when a contributor mentioned that “people assume you’re straight and then eventually you have to go on record and say ‘no I’m no’” (ItGetsBetterCanada, 2010). Singer Adam Lambert described how even fame and success did not protect him from troubles similar to those faced by LGBT youths:

You know, even someone like me, someone that has recently come into some success in his career—I’m touring the world I have a CD out I do music videos I live the dream—even I get bullied. You look under any, you know, comment section on any article and there’s bullies in there telling me that I’m a faggot that I’m ugly that I’m gross ew gross nasty he’s a girly, all the crap, you know, I’m singled out and it’s all gay gay gay gay even though there’s so much more to me. (Lambert, 2010)

These stories illustrate the different ways that a person can be forced into a counterpublic. This narrative focuses on how success does not guarantee that one is immune from bullying. The use of a communal story reflects the first ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric, in which people are constituted into a collective identity through identification (Charland, 1987). Narratives allow individuals to identify with this counterpublic identity. Here, both Colfer and Lambert employ narratives that would help the audience identify with them. A few contributors even described the point at which they found themselves to have hit rock-bottom due to the marginalization that they faced. Tim Gunn shares his perspective:

I have a very important message for LGBT youth. It gets better, it really does. What does Tim Gunn know about my anguish and despair? As a 17 year old youth who was in quite a bit of despair, I attempted to kill myself. . . . I was in a

whole other level of despair. . . . I understand the desperation, I understand the despair, and I understand how isolated you can feel. (Gunn, 2010)

By acknowledging that he had attempted suicide, Gunn (2010) constitutes himself as being part of a group of people who know what it means to have reached a very dark place in their lives. This example also helps to establish a constitutive rhetoric that invites empathy from the audience. Although not everyone may identify with a subset of the LGBT community that has attempted to commit suicide, this niche group is still tied to the broader counterpublic as a whole. The rhetoric interpellated the audience into identifying with the collective LGBT population, which includes Colfer (2010), Lambert (2010), Gunn (2010), and others. In essence, this helps the audience to achieve consubstantiality (Burke, 1969) with the collective subject position.

In discussing their collective trials and tribulations, video contributors conceal the differences that exist within the larger community. In this way, identification with the group can unite people despite individual differences (Burke, 1969). However, counterpublics can act in opposition with one another, “practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). The LGBT community is by no means monolithic, and its constituents can form cliques or subgroups that ostracize one another (Han, 2008). In order to create a more welcoming conception of the LGBT community and promote identification, the differences between competing counterpublics have to be downplayed:

You probably think that because you’re 15 and you live in Ames, Iowa, that you’ll never fit in with gay guys because they’re all flaming effeminate or they’re all super hot and tan and you’ll never be that hot. But [if] there’s a place for me, there’s totally a place for you. (Self & Branum, 2010)

The example above presents a narrative of acceptance despite different perceptions of what it means to be gay or to be attractive within the gay male population. Narratives that emphasize shared experiences can unite people from different backgrounds and allow them to identify with the same community (Dubriwny, 2009). Rhetoric can also be employed at critical junctures of social development to seize upon emerging tensions and exigencies, as “the development of new subject positions, of new constitutive rhetorics, is possible at particular historical moments” (Charland, 1987, p. 141). When timed or used incorrectly, however, constitutive rhetoric can fail to promote identification among its intended audience or even backfire (Zagacki, 2007).

Although counterpublics allow for a safe discursive space for their constituents, counterpublic messages are also meant to be directed outwards to challenge dominant thought within the general population (Fraser, 1990). A Facebook employee stated:

I'm pretty proud of whom I am and if I show you who I am and you don't like it, it puts the responsibility back on you to actually have to decide how to deal with me. But I don't have to be the one to carry it. (Theofficialfacebook, 2010).

In this example, the speaker was challenging the assumption that marginalized individuals must be responsible for their acceptance among the dominant culture. Indeed, it is often the subaltern counterpublic that has to justify its participation and position to the wider audience (Brouwer, 2001). Members of the LGBT counterpublic can counter this by shifting the onus of justifying their standpoint outwards. This kind of rhetoric functions to create community and unite its members, although it may seem like it is directed at other people. The “emancipatory potential” (Fraser, 1990, p. 68) of counterpublics resides in the dialectic between being a protected discursive space and acting as a base for sharing their messages with the public. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted in her contribution to the It Gets Better Project that:

The story of America is the story of people coming together to tear down barriers, stand up for rights, and insist on equality, not only for themselves but for all people. And in the process, they create a community of support and solidarity that endures. Just think of the progress made by women just during my lifetime, or ethnic, racial and religious minorities over the course of our history—and by gays and lesbians, many of whom are now free to live their lives openly and proudly. (Clinton, 2010)

This example highlights historical and cultural precedents that legitimize the LGBT counterpublic by raising the issues that now confront the LGBT community. It establishes the concept of struggle as a core aspect of American history, intertwining the counterpublic identity with that of the general public. There is also a rhetoric of hope present in that it discusses the possibility for change and progress. Although counterpublics arise in opposition to the public-at-large, their conceptualization is still contingent on how they are narratized in relation to the larger scene (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). In addition, the second ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric is that a transhistorical subject is posed in order to allow the individual to identify with the collective identity narratively (Charland, 1987). For example, the story of struggle and unity presented by Clinton allows LGBT individuals to recognize that the challenges they face are not unique to specific

individuals and that others have faced similar obstacles in the past and triumphed. The historical narrative acts as an engine to allow individuals to transcend boundaries of identity and move into the collective identity (Bacon, 2007; Morus, 2007) of being part of an oppressed group.

The rhetoric that constitutes this new collective identity within the IGB project calls upon troubled young people to live a life of happiness and freedom. This impulse exists because the new narrative works to compel these individuals to act freely, such as when Burns (2010) said:

Coming out was painful, but life gets so much better for me. And I want to tell any teen who might see this, give yours a chance to see just how much life, how much life will get better. And it will get better. You will get out of the household that doesn't accept you. You will get out of that high school and you never have to deal with those jerks again if you don't want to. You will find and you will make new friends who will understand you, and life will get so, so, so, much better. (Burns, 2010)

These narratives can empower the LGBT counterpublic to regain the freedom that they had lost by being tethered to dominant narratives. The third ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric is that an illusion of freedom is presented to the audience (Charland, 1987). The individual who identifies with the collective identity is compelled to act out the remainder of a narrative in order to maintain its consistency.

I suggest here that the counterpublic reality that is being articulated is not merely illusion, but the product of collective imagination. Imagination, or the ability to conceive alternate realities, is crucial to the development of a counterpublic, although it is typically used to marginalize these subaltern groups (Asen, 2002). Members of the dominant group can exclude subaltern groups by imagining them as dangerous or deviant within the public sphere, effectively silencing them by preventing their voices from entering public discourse. To counter this, the LGBT community can employ imagination not as a tool of marginalization but instead in a way that privileges the messages of their story. Indeed, people can be constituted as free through narratives that describe them as such (Bacon, 2007). The appeals that are made in the IGB project are targeted to a specific counterpublic, and as long as individuals feel that they are a part of that public, they can be persuaded to identify with the group's narrative (McGee, 1975). In submitting to the collective narrative, they gain access to the collective ability to imagine new positive stories. By speaking out

and defining the terms of the debate in their own way, LGBT individuals were able to empower themselves and reverse the ways in which they had been systematically silenced in mainstream discussions.

### **IT GETS BETTER AS COUNTER-NARRATIVE**

The telling of a counter-narrative is at the heart of many of the narratives produced by the It Gets Better project. The rhetoric of hope found within the It Gets Better project is embedded within counter-narratives. These counter-narratives “are always stories of self-expression and self-definition, but they may also be stories of repair and restitution” (Nelson, 1996, p. 98). Many of the stories found within the project are stories of self-expression and self-definition. The teller of an IGB project narrative “re-describes a dominant story, repudiates it for her or himself, and sets a new course that commits her or him to certain values for the future” (Nelson, 1996, p. 98). A good example is the video produced by Gene Robinson (2010), the first openly gay Episcopalian bishop in the United States.

Robinson (2010) first re-described the dominant narrative by discussing how religious people often say that being LGBT means that a person is unnatural in god’s eyes. He further notes that people may grow up in a household that is deeply religious or attend a church in which LGBT individuals are depicted as being fundamentally disordered or unacceptable to god. People who attempt to reconcile their LGBT identity with an unsympathetic church institution or faith often feel trapped between the competing spheres (Roseborough, 2006). Another example is when a Google employee describes that he “grew up at the dinner table hearing conversations about how gay people should die of AIDS, how, um, gay people were less than, you know, straight people” (Betterintech, 2010).

Once the dominant story has been described, a rhetor can then repudiate it by rejecting its assumptions and demonstrating that deviations in that storyline exist. Robinson (2010) repudiates the dominant narrative of religion being incompatible with the LGBT identity, not only for himself but also for the viewer: “I am living proof that it gets better and that it is getting better. . . . I want to tell you as a religious person that [those who say that being gay is terrible] are flat out wrong” (Robinson, 2010). Another example is when actor Max Adler (2010) from the TV show *Glee* discusses some of the feedback he had received from talking to a number of students. They told him that they felt as if they had it coming to

them or that the bullying was deserved in some way. Furthermore, he notes the feeling of powerlessness and isolation that can result from this perspective. Reflecting on that situation, he concludes by saying, “I just want to let you know that’s absolutely the wrong way of thinking and it’s not true. You do not deserve to be bullied at all” (Adler, 2010).

Finally, a new course for the audience can be described by the rhetor. It is here that the rhetoric of hope often comes into play as it involves the imagining of new possibilities, as Robinson (2010) demonstrates:

You know, you can have the life that you hope for. Because God hopes for that kind of life for you, a better life. If you want a partner or when marriage equality comes and it will come, you can have a husband or wife and live together and make life together. If you want children, you can have children and you can be a great mom or dad. God loves you the way you are and god doesn’t want you to change. And god doesn’t want you to be cured or healed because there is nothing to be healed from. . . . Things are changing. So if you’re considering hurting yourself, please don’t. Please don’t. God wants you to live in the light of God’s love and that light will take away all of this darkness. (Robinson, 2010)

What is at work here is that a story is being told in order to challenge dominant interpretations of order and privilege. Within a society in which only the dominant members are able to access the resources available to its community members, these counterstories enable the “tellers to reclaim those goods, but this time as full-fledged participants” (Nelson, 1996, p. 98). In many ways, they are examples of personal, lived experiences. Life stories by narrators are interrelated with and indicative of different spheres of contexts (Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, & Lieblich, 2008). For example, according to Harter et al. (2006), people with disabilities have to perform a counter-narrative of disability to counter hegemonic assumptions about them. In this way, they challenge rhetoric that positions them as being inferior to able-bodied individuals. They use artistic portrayals of flight in order to challenge the dominant narrative of having people with disabilities “whose physiques and intellects are seen as barriers to expressions of their existential gifts: their minds, spirits, and aesthetic impulses” (Harter et al., 2006, p. 13). While LGBT individuals may not be considered disabled in a physical sense, they are still seen as being different in a conceptual way—in other words, they “often fall short of “normalcy”” (Harter et al., 2006, p. 13).

Some of the counter-narratives in the IGB project highlight the damaging effects of LGBT bullying for the general population. In explaining how LGBT youths absorb the idea that they are fundamentally flawed or different in some way, comedian Sarah Silverman

says, “Dear America, when you tell gay Americans that they can’t serve their country openly [in the military] or marry the person that they love, you’re telling that to kids too” (Silverman, 2010). Fellow comedian Kathy Griffin is of the opinion that “the politicians, so-called religious leaders, and pundits who have made careers out of saying that being gay is wrong, or immoral, or that gays are somehow less than, they all have blood on their hands” (Griffin, 2010). These examples demonstrate how LGBT youths come to believe in the dominant narratives that oppress them and imbue them with a feeling of other-ness and inferiority.

To combat this perception, counter-narratives can be used to create community by reimagining what it means to be different and by celebrating the LGBT identity. They demonstrate not only that there is hope, but that a person’s hopes and dreams can come to be realized in the future, as Shears (2010) describes:

I’m living the dreams now that I created when I was 15 years old. I’m living out those fantasies that I had, and it’s such a rewarding, amazing life that I’ve gotten to lead. . . . With the experiences that you have as a queer kid, queer young adult, that that’s going to give you a whole new perspective for the rest of your life. And it can instill in you a sense of joy, a sense of, you know, inspiration, an amazing sense of humor. Now, for my career, I get to run around on stage in front of a ton of people and rip at my clothes and shake my ass, and act as gay as I want to be. And, you know, express myself however I want to in an explosive way. That’s a direct response to the fact that I didn’t feel like I could do it when I was 15. (Shears, 2010)

The example shows that there is value in being different and that the struggles that young people face can be channeled into a more hopeful reality, not just a hopeful ideal. It is here that the rhetoric transcends wishful thinking and moves into a hope that can motivate action. As Oakley (2010) noted in his video, hope is not necessarily what makes people happy. Instead, both Barge (2003) and Oakley (2010) mention that hope marks an opportunity to take action and bring about the change that people want to see in their lives. With this line of reasoning, being part of the LGBT community means not only identifying with it, but also acting to better the lives of fellow LGBT individuals.

Counter-narratives are central to the IGB project because they are the mechanism by which dominant negative interpretations of the LGBT community are challenged. These narratives articulate what it means to be part of the collective group. They work by negating oppressive narratives, replacing them instead with the rhetoric of hope. A narrative can be

difficult to dislodge once it has become mainstream among the population (Dionisopoulous, 2009). Despite that, it is not an impossible endeavor, and the IGB project represents a concerted effort by individuals to portray the LGBT identity as something worthy of celebration, not denigration. The name of the campaign itself encapsulates a counterstory in brief, going against the common notion that life will be a constant struggle for LGBT individuals. While there may be some truth in that notion, the IGB rhetoric works by showing that there are positive realities associated with being LGBT.

### **IT GETS BETTER: THE CLICK**

The click of consciousness marks not only the point of entry into the LGBT community as an identity but also deepening identification with the community's narrative. Originally a feminist term, it describes the moment of epiphany in which a woman realizes that she is a feminist, therefore changing her views in a fundamental way (O'Reilly, 1971). There are three different steps of clicks or turning points within the IGB narratives. Indeed, the turning point of the click is central to the narratives within the IGB project. These lightbulb moments signify flashes of clarity that can change a person's entire worldview (Martin & Sullivan, 2010). I argue that it can be applied to situations where there is an issue of identity in marginalized contexts, in this case with the IGB project.

The first type of epiphany is the click of identification with the LGBT community. The second type or step is when this identification with a community evolves into being personally comfortable with the identity and thinking of it in a positive light. This is when the narratives come full circle and transitions from the negative to the positive. Finally, the third type of click refers to the daily realizations that people have regarding their identity. These clicks can occur often and come one after another (O'Reilly, 1971). In the IGB project, these stories of the click are most commonly found in the videos in which multiple speakers narrate their own coming out stories, such as the ones by Facebook and Pixar employees.

The first type of click occurs when people realize that they really are part of the LGBT community and that it is their reality. One Facebook employee explains, "I told them that I love them, that I was their son, and you know my brother's brother, and in addition to all those things I was gay," (Theofficialfacebook, 2010). A Pixar employee who described

how it felt to be gay but uncomfortable or unhappy about it talks about how “there’s a sense of invisibility when you’re gay because you don’t want to step out, you don’t want to show too much. Not everybody is Kurt on *Glee*” (PixGetsBetter, 2010). Here, there is the identification with the LGBT community without any emphasis on how it makes them feel more connected with others. Although the person recognizes their difference, they still feel like it is something that has to be concealed, not something that can yield positive results.

The second category of turning point moves into the territory of being comfortable with one’s identity. This is when they not only know who they are but also know that things have gotten better for them and that it can only improve from there. Narratives that describe this type of click consciousness act as a rhetoric of hope. Indeed, “when people don’t believe that their life will get better, they run out of hope and they’re on a path to the worst destination. And it’s hope that is the one thing that will turn them around” (Oakley, 2010). The paradigmatic change in worldview occurs from these click moments, shifting a person’s perspective to a more hopeful orientation. A Pixar employee explains that “I found a new me, and it was the right me this time” (PixGetsBetter, 2010), demonstrating a reaffirmed sense of self. One of the narrators in the Facebook video mentions:

My fraternity brothers, all of whom were straight came to me and said, “Peter, if you could change and be straight, would you?” And I, I thought for a second and said “absolutely not.” And I know that in high school the answer would have been completely different, it would have been a resounding yes. But then you know as you grow and you realize that being gay is part of who you are and what makes you unique and what makes you great, you realize it’s something you don’t want to let go of. (Theofficialfacebook, 2010)

This example demonstrates the fundamental evolution of thinking that occurs before the click and after the click. The person indirectly referred to how this turning point in his narrative completely changed how he views the LGBT identity. One other way to look at it is how “it was like a clarity, it was like, if you’re just, you’ve got mud on your windshield, it was gone” (ItGetsBetterCanada, 2010). This shift into a clearer point of view can also prepare an individual against future harm, because “the moment you start to believe in yourself, and listen to your own voice in your own head, there’s no getting to you” (Crocker, 2010).

These clicks of consciousness occur with more frequency after the first two major turning points. Stories of these moments describe how the fundamental change in worldview will lead to even better realizations over time of how being LGBT can have positive effects

on one's life. As an individual describes, "there was a turning point in my life, it's when I decided to be myself, expose myself, be who I am, come out. Each year kept getting sequentially better" (ItGetsBetterCanada, 2010). Having experienced the major click moments, people can begin to appreciate the things that they would have missed if they had chosen to end their own lives (PixGetsBetter, 2010). A Google employee explains:

The thing about things getting better is that it doesn't just happen once. It's not one day when you wake up and go "oh my god, things are better." Things keep getting better over and over and in really small ways. Things got better the first time I said to myself, "okay I admit it, I'm gay," like, that was a huge step. Things got better when I told a friend and I just, somebody else other than me knew. Things got better when I stood in front of my brother and it was like the hardest thing in the world to say. . . . but he almost laughed and me and just said "yeah, it's okay," and he gave me a hug. (Betterintech, 2010)

These smaller moments reaffirm the new standpoint that comes from accepting themselves as an LGBT individual. Furthermore, talking about the click is one thing, but these stories are strengthened by the clicks that occur even as the narratives are being told in a recursive, self-perpetuating process. In one of the videos, the speaker was recounting how he and his partner had recently marked their 6-year anniversary together. As he said this, he started tearing up and said:

We have a cat, and we have a lovely little one bedroom place that is ours, and I get to walk up those nine steps and open the door and know that he's home and know that I get to kiss him and hug him when I walk in the door, and that brings me so much joy. (PixGetsBetter, 2010).

This sequence of smaller realizations shows the sequential nature of clicks. There are the major turning points that occur in life stories, and then there are the smaller ones that reaffirm the original clicks. They can occur constantly in day-to-day life (Beckett, 2010), because a person's awareness is heightened each time and new levels of awareness are reached. Although each person arrives at their moments differently, they all lead to an awareness that they are part of a collective identity. I suggest here that many in the LGBT community experience these clicks daily. Just like how the process of coming out can never really be complete due to the constant need to "out" one's self repeatedly to new people, the process of discovering the good things that can come from living life openly as part of the LGBT community is a continuous process. The moments that LGBT individuals often face as part of this process form the clicks that constitute them as part of a collective counterpublic.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

The rhetoric used in the IGB campaign works to connect LGBT youths as individuals to a much larger collective LGBT community and their allies. The individuals are constituted into the oppositional stance of a counterpublic. Then, counter-narratives are employed that dispel dominant ideologies that may disparage the LGBT identity. Finally, the clips highlight moments in the narrative when they knew they had truly entered this group identity. As part of this newfound identity, LGBT individuals may feel compelled to live out the narratives that are part of the collective identity. These messages were directed to those who feel isolated, marginalized, or different from what is considered mainstream. The creators of these videos were very careful to note that they understood how it felt to be depressed, such as Gunn (2010), denigrated, as with Lambert (2010), or different, much like Savage and Miller (2010). Through constitutive rhetoric, these individuals were invited to 'join' the broader LGBT community which comprises individuals who have found people who accept and love them as they are or places where they can be themselves and not live in fear.

There are a few overarching implications of the IGB Project. First, it highlights the ability of the LGBT counterpublic to find its voice and articulate its own forms of identity within the larger public sphere. New media such as YouTube have increased the reach of this form of constitutive rhetoric, and the IGB project as a counterpublic statement has achieved substantial mainstream coverage. The campaign utilized YouTube in order to transmit messages that both address a general public while still having a personal message to LGBT teenagers. Much of the scholarship on constitutive rhetoric and counterpublics has focused on how they are limited to geographical, ethnic, and racial boundaries. Here, the rhetoric constituted a community of people from different backgrounds that existed throughout the country. Although a person may feel alone, whether figuratively or physically, IGB contributors emphasized the existence of a community that exists and that supports them explicitly, regardless of geographical location or physical presence. This was made possible

due to the internet and its ability to connect people and bring them together in a more highly visible way.

The counter-narratives and click moments that were described work together to constitute marginalized LGBT youths as being part of the broader counterpublic, thus constituting them as being part of a specific community. While the counterpublic is the overarching construct behind the rhetoric, counter-narratives are what empower individuals to identify with the counterpublic, and the rhetoric of the click consciousness indicates the different levels of identification with the LGBT identity. The different levels of click moments highlight how constitutive rhetoric revolves around evolving levels of identification. In other words, the LGBT community is not just a monolithic identity which demands a one-dimensional form of identification. Instead, people can feel connected to this counterpublic community while still living their own counter-narratives and experiencing their own forms of click moments.

The reason why this creation of community is unique here is because the IGB project utilizes constitutive rhetoric that is not limited to a geographical or ethnic identity. Instead, what it does is that it builds community among people who share an LGBT identity, and this group is not only diverse but is also spread throughout the United States. If rhetoric can be used to constitute a collective identity from such a wide array of individuals, then the reach of constitutive rhetoric deserves a closer look in the future. These are individuals united by nothing other than that common designation, and yet they much feel some sense of unity when participating in the IGB project. Thus, the constitutive rhetoric here may not envision a geographical enclave for these individuals, but rather a discursive space for LGBT individuals that covers both the more urban areas of the country and the places that are less populated and harder to reach.

The rhetoric of the IGB project works to redefine what it means to be LGBT in today's society. A common feature in the examples that were used is that there are many people out there who will accept these LGBT youths as they are and love them regardless. Identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender may no longer be taboo or an embarrassment, according to this redefinition of being LGBT. In fact, the campaign operates on the belief that LGBT youths are special and have much to contribute to society. All it takes is for them to break out of detrimental dominant narratives and forge ahead with this

new narrative. Although the videos mostly privilege the viewpoints of adults who have grown up and survived beyond the confusion or terror in their earlier years, they also reflect a collective sense of being comfortable with LGBT identity. Burns (2010) exemplifies this comfort level in his reflection on what he would have told his 13-year-old self, in which he mentioned his wedding proposal to his husband and the night he won the election to become a City Council member. The idea that gays and lesbians can be married, symbolically or otherwise, is fairly recent. With this reconceptualized identity as part of the LGBT collective, they are also able to provide support to community members who are facing difficulties in their own lives.

This is why the individual is important in the production of constitutive rhetoric. Although there are cases in which a collective narrative can be used to create community, this campaign demonstrates how constitutive rhetoric can be created through a larger variety of individual stories. The community is constructed among them, creating an overarching narrative supported by their individual stories. I argue that this is important in the study of rhetoric because constitutive rhetoric and counterpublics are often seen as being the product of a centralized narrative, one that arises from the abstraction of texts and stories. Here, the role of individual deserves greater attention because it is through highlighting the uniqueness of each person's LGBT narrative that a sense of commonality can be created. It is a constitutive rhetoric that builds a community of LGBT individuals who share common experiences because these people have their own stories that reflect a common thread, but in many different ways.

The rhetoric of the It Gets Better project highlights a newfound narrative of hope within the LGBT community. Hope is effective in building community and providing a sense of direction for the people in that group. It is useful not only as a uniting factor but also as a way to motivate people to act upon the world around them. This was crucial to the campaign because its rhetoric needed to counter the sense of powerlessness or hopelessness that comes with being part of an oppressed group. It also opens up a space for new possibilities to be imagined, because hope is both a feeling and a vehicle for turning ideals into action. The rhetoric of hope that was produced in the campaign was not only effective in its messaging but also in its ability to reach a much wider audience. Here, hope was not only an ideal but a

visible presence in the form of videos that were uploaded online. These narratives also emphasize the ability of the counterpublic to represent itself in the wider public sphere.

The campaign also acts as a guide for marginalized LGBT individuals not only to help them identify with the LGBT community, but also to recognize when this identification has occurred. Even as contributors to the IGB project concede that life can be difficult and that young people will likely face many forms of abuse as they grow up, they are adamant that there is hope and that things can only improve over time. With ever-increasing support for LGBT-related efforts, such as the repeal of the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy (Foley, 2010) and the positive belief in the inevitability of legal gay marriage, whether among students (Lipka, 2010) or by people such as Vice President Biden (Harmon, 2010), the new narratives being produced by LGBT community members may be equal parts optimism and reality. With these implications in mind, the IGB project may not be far off in its various portrayals of the future.

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