Does it get better? Exploring "It Gets Better" Videos Using Visual Sociology

Richard A. Brandon-Friedman, MSW, LCSW, LCAC & Marea K. Kinney, MSW

Indiana University School of Social Work

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

INDIANA UNIVERSITY
PURDUE UNIVERSITY
INDIANAPOLIS

Research Question

- **What visual signals are communicated by producers of "It Gets Better" videos**

Background

- The "It Gets Better" project was created in 2010 following the highly publicized suicides of two gay teenagers

- The project seeks to "inspire hope for young people facing harassment… to create a personal way for supporters everywhere to tell LGBT youth that, yes, it does indeed get better" (It Gets Better, 2013)

- Over 50,000 videos have been created by individuals, celebrities and organizations

- While there is no required format for the videos, most follow the original video format and narrative of an individual sitting in front of a camera talking directly to the viewer

- Muller (2011) suggested that the upper class, attractive, fashionable attributes of the original video producers may unintentionally exclude those who do not identify with the projected images

- Grzanka and Mann (2014) stated that IGB videos often implore individuals to endure suffering in order to gain later happiness.

Study Sample

- 50 videos that met the inclusionary criteria were randomly selected out of a total of 2,730 videos available at www.itgetsbetter.com

- Inclusion criteria:
  - Video was self-produced (not a part of a corporate production) and included only one individual
  - Producer was American, self-identified as a sexual minority, and spoke English in the video
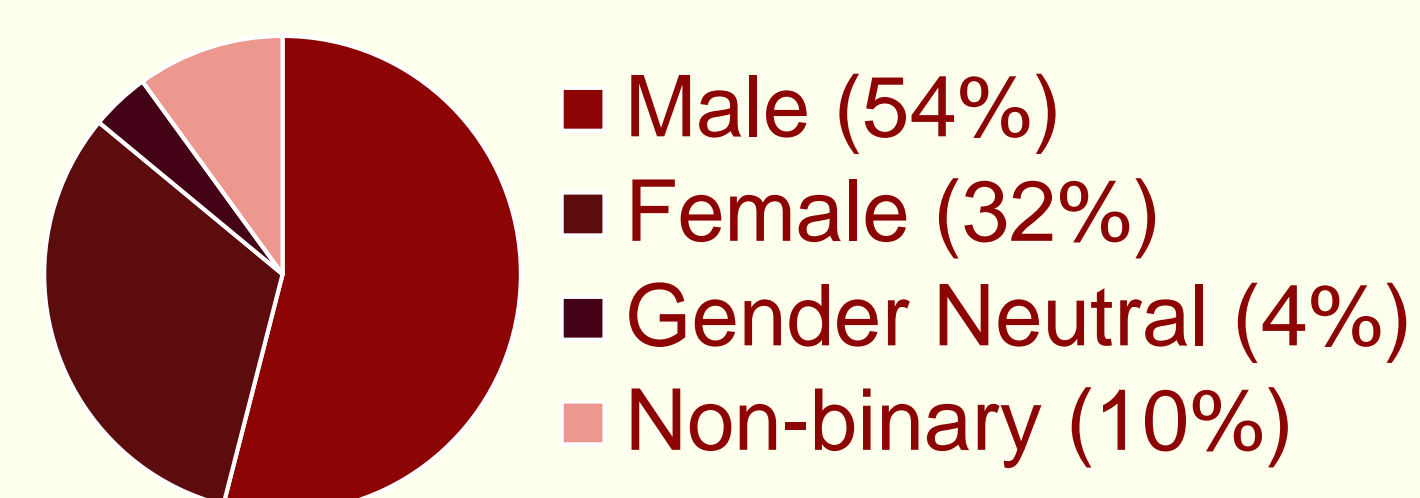
Methodology

- Two assistants determined if videos met country and self-identification criterion to ensure raters were not influenced by the videos' audio content during screening

- Three raters independently analyzed the videos for the following:
  - individual characteristics of the producer including socioeconomic status, age, gender, race/ethnicity, weight, build, attractiveness, gendered mannerisms, and gender conformity between gender presentation and mannerisms
  - Overall emotional expressiveness and levels of joy, shame, sadness, confidence, defiance, and empathy displayed
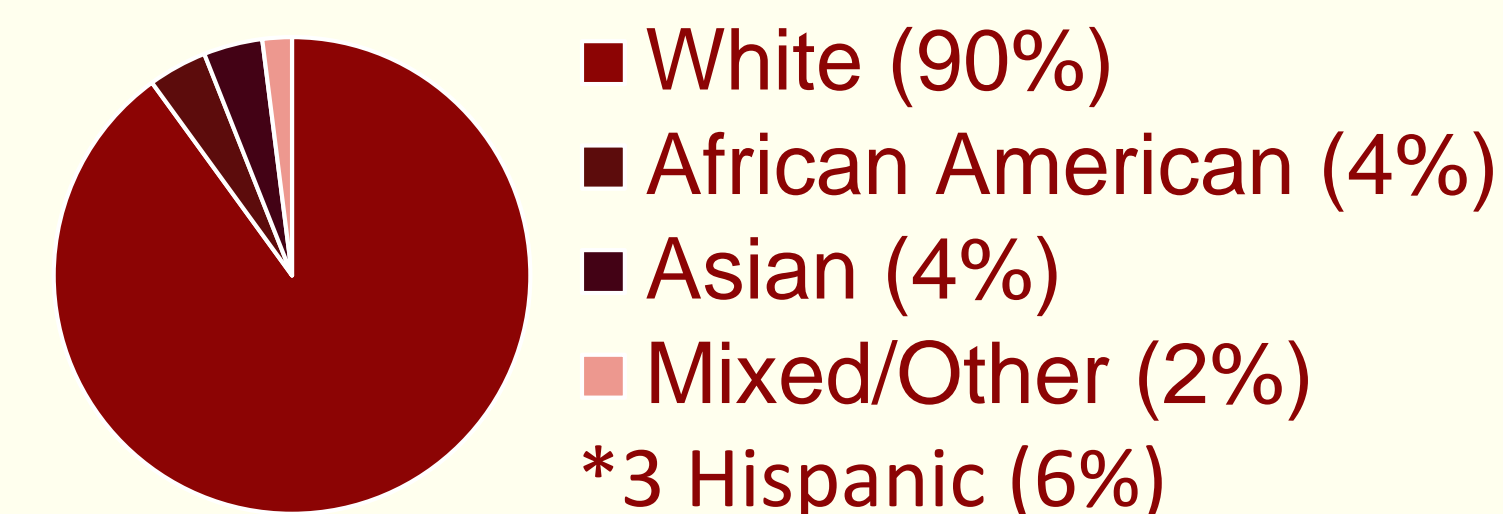
Results

- Interrater reliability for scaled variables were within an acceptable range (all α > .87)

- Discrepancies on gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, build, mannerisms, and gender conformity were discussed between all raters to reach consensus
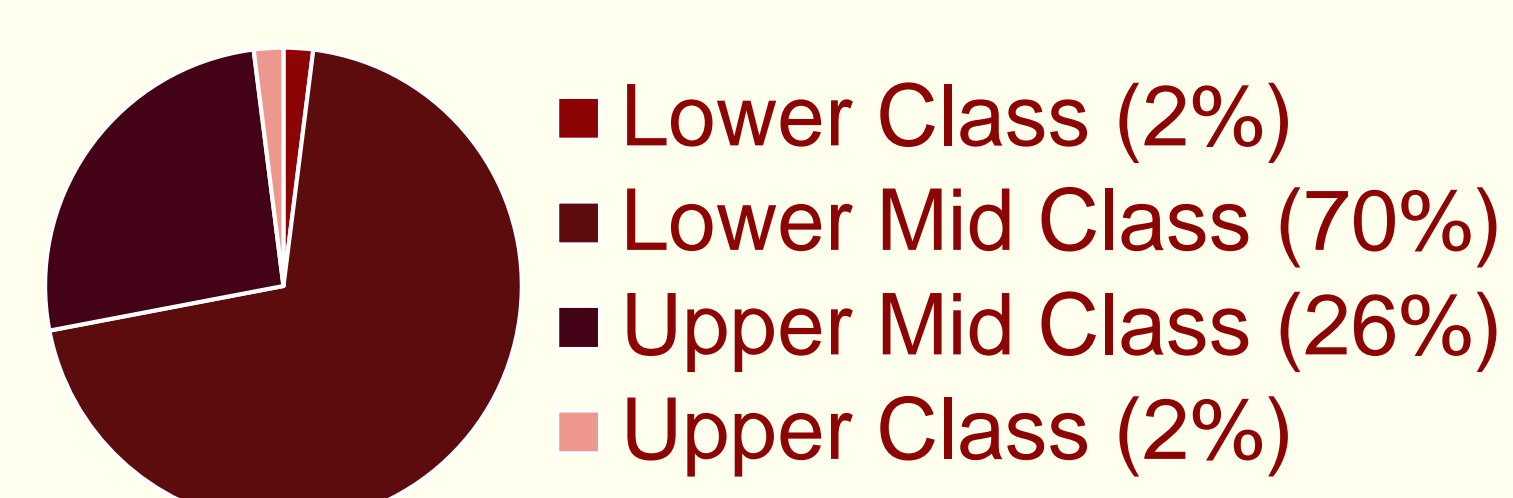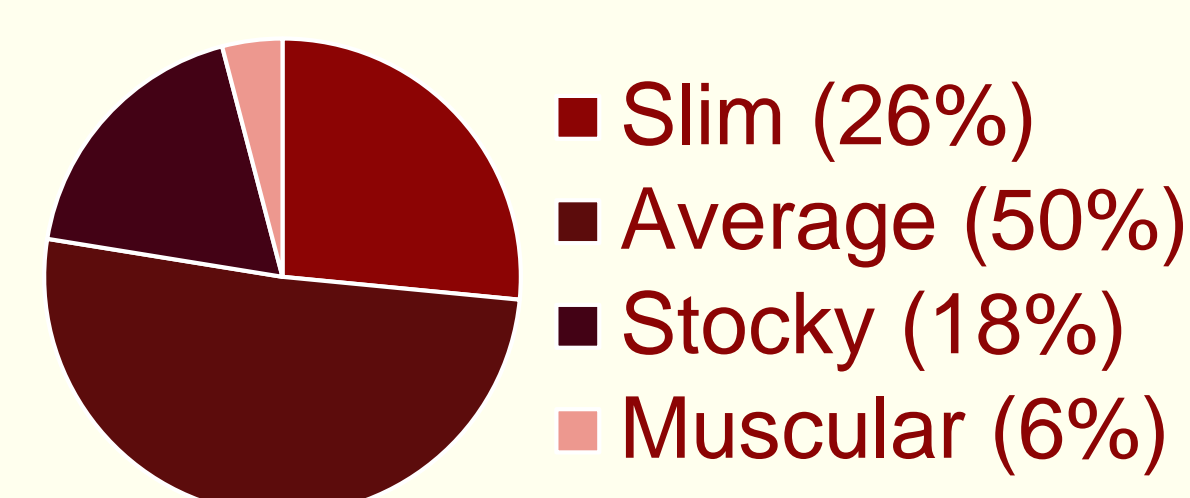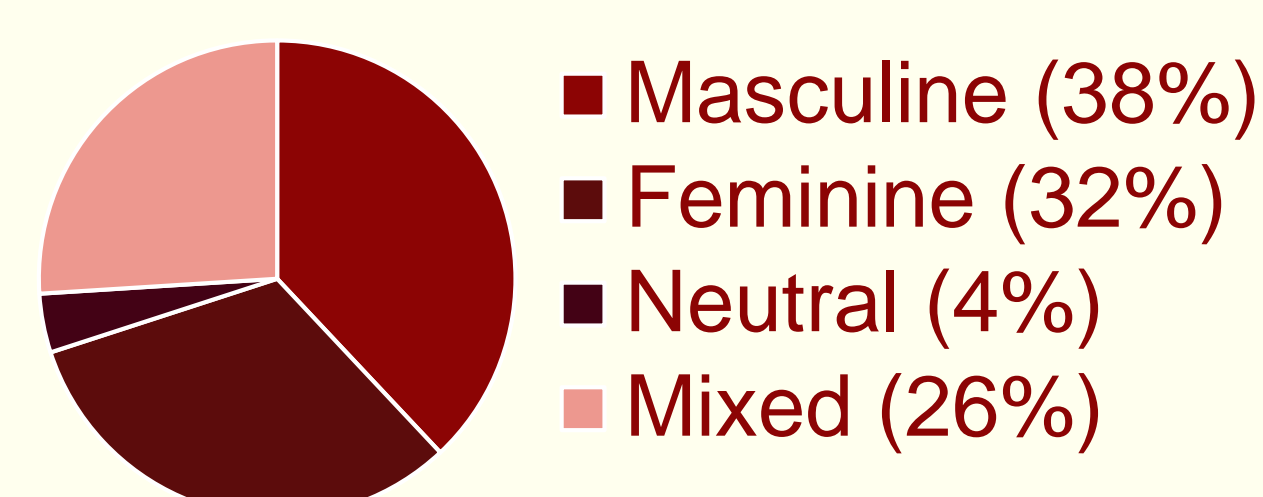
Gender
- Male (54%)
- Female (32%)
- Gender Neutral (4%)
- Non-binary (10%)

Race
- White (90%)
- African American (4%)
- Asian (4%)
- Mixed/Other (2%)
- *3 Hispanic (6%)

SES
- Lower Class (2%)
- Lower Mid Class (70%)
- Upper Mid Class (26%)
- Upper Class (2%)

Build
- Slim (26%)
- Average (50%)
- Stocky (18%)
- Muscular (6%)

Mannerisms
- Masculine (38%)
- Feminine (32%)
- Neutral (4%)
- Mixed (26%)

Gender Conformity
- Conforming (76%)
- Non-conforming (8%)
- Mixed (16%)

Scaled Descriptives

	Range	Min	Max	Mean	SD	α
Overall	8.00	2.00	10.00	6.03	1.53	.93
Joy	8.33	0.00	8.33	3.53	2.36	.92
Shame	8.67	0.00	8.67	3.34	2.24	.88
Sadness	9.33	.67	10.00	5.56	2.30	.89
Confidence	8.33	1.67	10.00	7.49	1.72	.89
Defiance	10.00	0.00	10.00	5.55	2.37	.90
Empathy	8.67	.33	9.00	5.21	2.30	.87
Attractiveness	4.67	4.67	9.33	7.13	1.23	.89

- Muller's (2011) critique that video producers skew to being higher than average in attractiveness and from the middle or upper class were supported

- It Gets Better video producers are predominantly White, and gender conforming in physical appearance and mannerisms, so LGBTQ+ individuals who are minorities, gender nonconforming, or from a lower SES may experience feelings of exclusion

- Grzanka and Mann's (2014) concern that the videos indicate one must suffer to attain later happiness was supported as video producers displayed higher levels of sadness and shame than would be expected in videos of support

- Despite intending their videos as messages of support and to suggest life will get better, video producers exhibited little joy and only moderate amounts of empathy

References

It Gets Better. (2013). It Gets Better. Retrieved April 17, 2016, from www.itgetsbetter.org

Grzanka, P. R., & Mann, E. S. (2014). Queer youth suicide and the psychopolitics of "It Gets Better." *Sexualities, 17*(4), 369-393.

Muller, A. (2011). Virtual communities and translation into physical reality in the 'It Gets Better' project. *Journal of Media Practice, 12*(3), 269-277.