

A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation within the “It Gets Better Project”

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Abstract:

In September 2010, Dan Savage founded the YouTube-based “It Gets Better Project.” A key component within the ongoing social movement to eradicate youth bullying and suicide, IGBP messaging requires further examination of how life “gets better.” Through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and application of Collins’ (2000) matrix of domination framework, this study examines race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Empirical data reveal participants offered little about their own racial and class identities and the impact of those on life getting better but were forthcoming in discussing how their gender and sexual identities impacted their childhood victimization. Concurrently, participants made gross assumptions about viewers’ racial, class, gender, and sexual identities, projecting an overly simplistic message of life improving regardless of viewers’ circumstances or intersectionality. Findings contribute to online participation research concerning how the internet is used for social change and how social inequalities are (re)produced in online projects.

Keywords:

multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA); matrix of domination; intersectionality; It Gets Better Project; YouTube

Overview:

In response to multiple suicides among self-identified or *perceived* lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) youth (Brooks, 2010), columnist and “sexpert” (Thomas, 2011) Dan Savage created the YouTube-based It Gets Better Project (IGBP) on September 15, 2010. More than 50,000 videos targeting at-risk LGBTQ youth exist in the IGBP corpus today, created by LGBTQ-identified and allied adults and adolescents (“About,” 2013). Moreover, global media attention has been garnered for youth bullying and suicide (Mackenzie, 2010), and policy changes have been implemented at the local, state, and federal levels (Cooper, 2013), rendering the IGBP a key, online-based component within a larger, ongoing social movement.

The goal of the IGBP was to bring awareness to the problem of LGBTQ youth bullying and suicide, but the messages contained within the project demand further examination, specifically in consideration of how life “gets better” and what, where, why, when, and for whom. Through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) of the IGBP messaging applying sociologist’s Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000, 2009) matrix of domination theoretical framework, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are examined in depth.

Theory:

Building upon Crenshaw’s (1993) intersectionality framework, Collins (2000) coined the phrase matrix of domination and defined it as “the overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (p. 228). She explained that four elements of power combine to form a matrix of domination:

The structural domain organizes oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experience and the individual consciousness that ensues. (p. 276).

As Collins (2009) articulates, the media are part of the structural domain and are used to reproduce hegemonic ideals about race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, yet the matrix of domination has yet to be applied to social media-based content, such as YouTube videos. Therefore, guided by the matrix of domination framework and employing MCDA, this study furthers understanding of social media content by answering the following: How are race, class, gender, and sexual orientation discussed within the YouTube-based IGBP videos?

Method:

Critical Discourse Analysis is concerned with “the effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs,” with the ultimate goal of moving beyond the interpretation of texts and advocating for social change (Fairclough, 2010, p. 8). Power is revealed through the implicit meanings of texts “at the word, sentence, and passage level” (Brabham, 2012, p. 398). Nonetheless, the intent of CDA is not description but rather explanation and intervention within social interaction and social structures (Van Dijk, 2001), and because of the intense process of examining explicit and implicit meanings, the method is typically reserved for understanding a small corpus of data.

Historically, interdisciplinary scholars have used CDA to understand written texts, but the IGBP is a visual project comprised of text and imagery. Thus, transcript analysis alone would be insufficient in fully understanding producers’ meanings as conveyed in their videos. Therefore, to account for both the videos’ verbal and non-verbal information, I used Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) as outlined by Machin and Mayr (2012), which considers how elements of visual communication contribute to power relations alongside verbal or written texts.

I critically analyzed a total of 21 IGBP videos uploaded between September 2010 and May 2012. Videos ranged from 46 seconds to 13 minutes and 49 seconds, averaging 5 minutes in length. The sample is comprised of individual testimonials featuring one person speaking, as opposed to myriad other types featured in the IGBP, such as couple, small or large group videos; video montages with little to no spoken words from a visible person; homemade music videos or enacted screenplays; or any other visual presentation that does not exclusively focus on one person speaking directly into the camera. As guided by Machin and Mayr (2012), I considered how participants presented themselves in their videos (i.e., dress, hair, make-up, etc.); settings in which videos were filmed; and participants’ gazes, mannerisms, poses, camera angles/distance, and identifiable editing, all of which contribute further to their overall message.

Discussion:

I analyzed the videos according to: 1) how participants spoke about their own racial, class, gender, and sexual identities; and 2) the assumptions participants’ made about their viewers’ racial, class, gender, and sexual identities. Collectively, participants offered little explicit information about their own racial and class identities and the impact of those on their own experiences of life “getting better,” leaving it to viewers to read into the implicit information conveyed. Regarding their own gender and sexual identities, however, participants were much more forthcoming and explicitly discussed both with regularity, taking time to explain how their gender and sexual identities impacted the bullying they were subjected to as youth. Concurrently, often participants made gross assumptions about their viewers’ racial, class, gender, and sexual identities, overwhelmingly presuming viewers to be Caucasian and of middle- or upper class status and that racial/class differences would have little to no impact on viewers’ lives improving according to the matrix of domination. Moreover, participants presumed viewers to be traditional, gender-conforming men or women who already identify as either lesbian or gay. The discourse was problematic on several levels. First, when participants fail to explicitly mention their identities and explain how their multidimensionality impacted both the bullying they received and how life got better, they were likely to project an overly simplistic, limited-

value, and in some instances blatantly false message of life getting better for everyone, regardless of individual circumstances. Furthermore, the narrow assumptions participants projected onto their presumed viewership may have the opposite effect of that intended: viewers who do not fit within these rigidly-defined boundaries may disregard participants' IGBP messaging altogether and miss out on life-saving resources contained within the social change project.

Intellectual Merit:

In sum, this study provides a unique application of Collins' (2000, 2009) matrix of domination framework, which has been applied only sparingly in mass communication studies overall, and to the author's best knowledge has never been applied to published data concerning social media-based strategic messaging. This empirical data offers further insight into participatory culture among marginalized populations (Jenkins, 2006), specifically through an understanding of how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are discussed within an online-based social change project. Moreover, the study extends research on LGBTQ media representation, most of which has centered on traditional media outlets like print, television, and film and has failed to adequately examine user-generated media content (Alwood, 1996; Gross, 2001; Streitmatter, 1995, 2009; Walters, 2003). At its broadest, findings contribute to literature examining advantages and disadvantages of online participation (Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2002), including how the internet is used for social change and how social inequalities are (re)produced online (Brabham, 2008; Postigo, 2009; Schäfer, 2011).

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MCDA of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation in the IGBP

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