



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Public Relations Review

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev)

## Full Length Article

## Public relations, activism and identity: A cultural-economic examination of contemporary LGBT activism

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Activism

Social movements

Identity

Cultural-economic model

## ABSTRACT

This article examines a contemporary articulation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activism, LGBT youth outreach, as a historically contextual moment. By way of a cultural-economic examination, this study explores the identities constructed by both producers and consumers of an LGBT activist campaign. The cultural-economic model (CEM; Curtin & Gaither, 2005) provides a critical theoretical framework to examine public relations, activism, and social movements.

## 1. Introduction

Activism and social movements have become of increasing interest to public relations scholars and practitioners. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists have been organizing, sustaining themselves, focusing on key social and cultural issues, and strategically communicating their positions on such issues (Alwood, 2013). LGBT movements provide an opportunity to examine organized activism engaging in public relations.

Throughout the decades, groups formed, launching local, regional, national, and international campaigns to address issues pertaining to sexuality and gender. Importantly, although bisexual and gender variant individuals have always participated in LGBT movements, historically they have been excluded and marginalized in LGBT movements (Armstrong, 2002). Preceding the contemporary LGBT movement, activists in the homophile, lesbian separatist and gay liberation movements had conflicting attitudes about including bisexual and gender variant individuals in their activities (Califia, 1997; Marotta, 1981; Meyerowitz, 2002). In the 1990s, however, in light of the HIV/AIDs epidemic there was a consolidation of bisexual and transgender inclusion in the American LGBT movement (Armstrong, 2002).

This article focuses on a contemporary articulation of LGBT activism, LGBT youth outreach, as a historically contextual moment. Through interviews with LGBT activists and LGBT youth this study explores the identities constructed by both producers and consumers of a campaign. Using the framework of the cultural-economic model (CEM; Curtin & Gaither, 2005), those identities are examined in terms of what norms they legitimize and why consumers adopt or reject some identities found in campaign materials.

Recognizing that the circuit of culture (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997), the precursor to the CEM, was designed to explore discursive articulations over time, this case selects a particular moment to examine. Since context is central to a cultural-economic examination, in order to understand LGBT youth activism as a discursive moment, it is important to consider a campaign within a cultural context. Education scholars Griffin and Ouellett (2003) identify three main eras in the history of LGBT issues and youth. Because it informs and shapes contemporary LGBT activism and strategic communication, the following section briefly outlines a history of LGBT youth and activism.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.01.005>

Received 18 January 2016; Received in revised form 28 June 2016; Accepted 20 January 2017

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### 1.1. LGBT youth and activism: a brief history

During the 1980s activists and scholars were developing a growing body of interdisciplinary research about the experiences of LGBT youth. Characterized by what Savin-Williams (1990) called a “clinicalization,” research emerging at this time focused on the “at-risk” status of gay and lesbian youth. Researchers identified this population as at increased risk for suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, low self-esteem, dropping out of school, homelessness, violence, HIV infection, and prostitution (Feldman, 1988; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Kourany, 1987; Remafedi, 1987).

The focus on gay and lesbian young people was a double-edged sword. Increased visibility brought much needed attention to marginalized youth. Conservatives, however, pointed to empirical data that showed how terrible and unhealthy it was to be gay, obscuring the cause (i.e., homophobia) and attributing it to homosexuality itself (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988).

Language of increased risk for gay and lesbian youth propelled policy debates and activist lobbying on local and national levels. In the United States, activist organizations continue to recognize the need for research that supports LGBT youth. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) conducted a landmark study of 10,000 LGBT youth ages 13–17 in the United States and according to the survey, LGBT youth are nearly twice as likely as their peers to have been verbally harassed and called names as well as to have been physically assaulted (Growing up LGBT, 2012). Chad Griffin, president of the Human Rights Campaign noted (Growing up LGBT, 2012, para. 2), “No one would say that growing up LGBT is easy, but this survey is a stark wake-up call to the daily toll that discrimination takes on vulnerable young people.”

Statistics further support the need for more youth-oriented advocacy work. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control (2014), suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people ages 10–24. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide as their straight peers (Centers for Disease Control, 2011), while almost half of young transgender individuals have thought about taking their lives and one-quarter report having made a suicide attempt (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2007). Given these statistics, it comes as no surprise that increasing attention has been given to LGBT youth outreach services (McKinley, 2010).

Today, activist efforts pertaining to LGBT youth outreach span a variety of micro-social and macro-social levels, from regional and local discussions about creating safe schools at the K-12 level to public policy enactment at the state and federal levels. At the federal level, the Obama administration held the first-ever White House Conference on Bullying Prevention in March 2010. President Obama, Vice-President Joe Biden, Cabinet Secretaries, and members of the White House Staff produced videos for the *It Gets Better Project*, a YouTube-based campaign started in September 2010 by internationally syndicated columnist Dan Savage and husband Terry Miller in response to the suicide of several gay youth. The *It Gets Better Project*, the focus of this research, is one of several activist outreach efforts currently aimed at LGBT youth.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Public relations and LGBT interests

Over the past several decades, the American LGBT movement has gained social and political momentum in pursuits of policy change and public opinion development. Public relations has played a vital role in the LGBT movement and has been instrumental in the construction of LGBT as a cohesive collective identity (Alwood, 2015). Despite this relationship, Edwards and L’Etang (2013) note that scholarship in public relations that takes an LGBT perspective is scarce. Until very recently, LGBT perspectives have been “effectively written out of research on public relations” (Edwards & L’Etang, 2013, p. 51–52), however, a body of literature examining LGBT issues in public relations is emerging.

To date, research has addressed several areas pertaining to public relations, activism, and the LGBT movement. Several scholars explore strategic communication campaigns pertaining to LGBT people and issues (see Tindall & Waters, 2013), campaigns often initiated by LGBT activist organizations. Research suggests that LGBT organizations manage legitimacy, position issues, and propel interests through public relations efforts (Mundy, 2013), building relations with broad stakeholders networks (Mundy, 2015) and often framing messages that privilege discourses of equality, acceptance, and understanding (Cabosky, 2014). To date, however, research shows that little has been done to understand LGBT publics’ experiences with LGBT activist public relations efforts. Weaver (2014) argues research on activist campaigns present opportunities to examine challenges faced by marginalized groups and voices in effort to change policy, public opinion, and social, cultural and economic practices.

### 2.2. Activism and public relations

Activists have been employing public relations since the 19th century (Coombs & Holladay, 2007), issuing strategic communication for creating awareness and building support. Groups including abolitionists, temperance activists, and muckrakers employed tactics including public speeches and printed communication to inform and persuade people about social issues. Activism, however, traditionally has not been considered part of the practice or discipline of public relations, stemming from the “inescapable understanding of PR as an organizational function” (Edwards, 2012, p. 12). Public relations scholarship, therefore, has historically struggled to account for activist publics (Demetrius, 2013).

Much contemporary scholarship conceptualizes activism within a functionalist framework, exploring how activists do public relations and the implications of such efforts for corporate entities (e.g., Kaur, 2015; Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009; Taylor & Das, 2010; Veil, Reno, Freihaut, & Oldham, 2015; White, 2012). Increasingly, public relations research has examined how activists use strategic

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