

# Get-Passives in Different Age Groups

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### Abstract

This study examines how the preferences of using the *get*-passive (e.g. “It got stolen”) or the *be*-passive (e.g. “It was stolen”) differ in people of different age groups. We hypothesized that younger speakers would be more likely to use the *get*-passive than older speakers. Our hypothesis was supported by a survey, in that the 18-30 age group claimed to use the *get*-passive variation more than did the 30 and above age group.

### Introduction

- “To be” has historically been the auxiliary used in English passive constructions.
- More recently, passive constructions using “to get” have emerged.
- This is typically considered to be a feature of informal speech.
- Younger speakers of English have been known to use informal forms in broader contexts.

### Hypothesis

- Younger speakers are more likely to use *get*-passives in their speech than older speakers.

### Method

- Participants were separated into two groups by age: 18-30 year olds (comprising 72 respondents) and 30+ year olds, comprising 21 respondents—8 of which were ages 30-50 and 13 age 50 and over.
- Data was collected by means of a survey in which participants were asked to self-analyze their use of *be*- and *get*-passives.
- Participants responded to 18 pairs of sentences, including 6 pairs of filler questions involving non-passive or ungrammatical uses of “to be” and “to get”. Each pair of sentences was identical except for the auxiliary verb used.

### Sample Questions

Check the answer that best applies to you in how you would use the verb in **bold**.

John and Mary **got** married in a chapel.

- a. I could definitely say something like this.
- b. I might say something like this.
- c. I would never say something like this.

John and Mary **were** married in a chapel.

- a. I could definitely say something like this.
- b. I might say something like this.
- c. I would never say something like this.

### Results

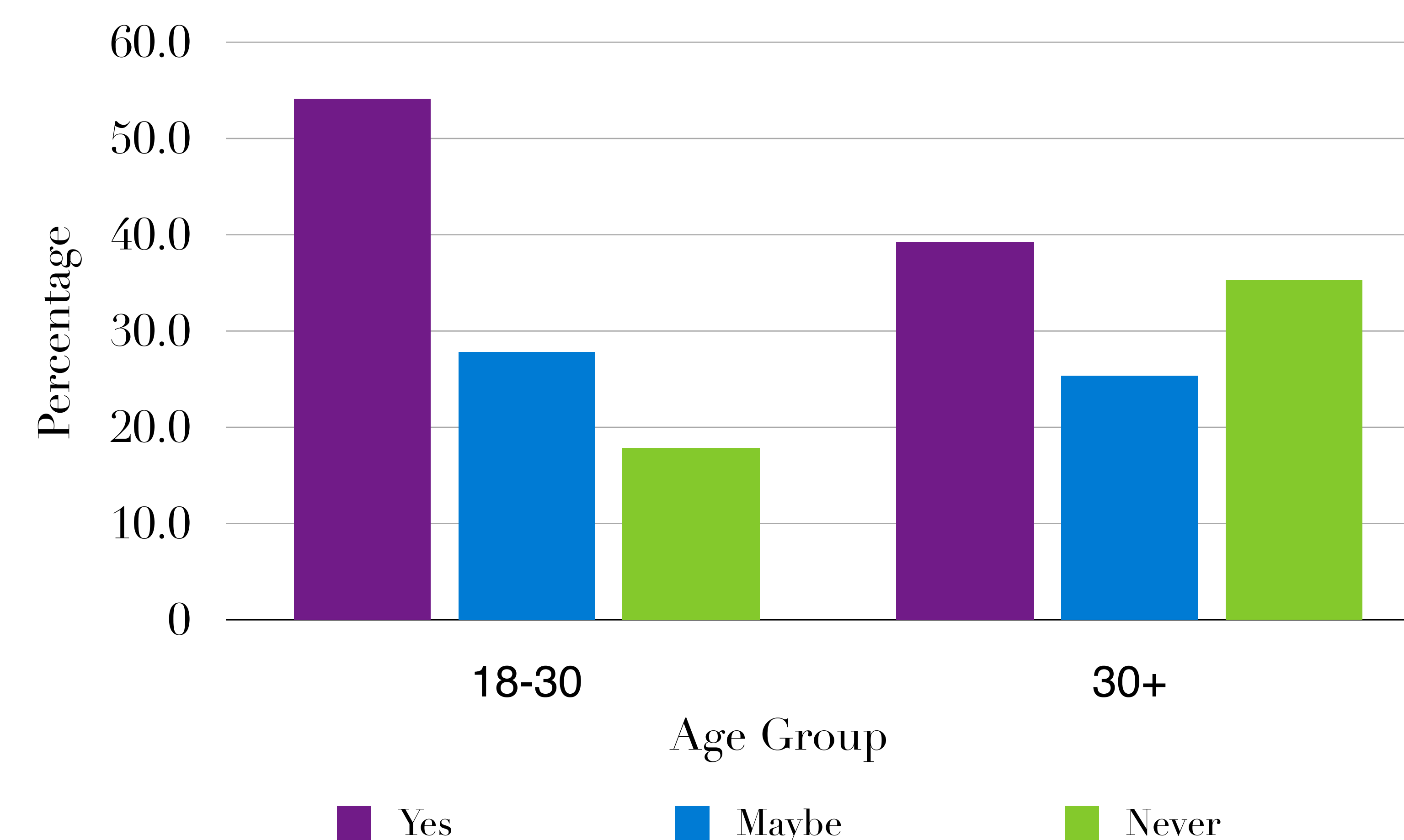


Fig. 1. Percentage of Answers to “Get” Questions By Age Group

- Calculated the percentage of “yes” (could say), “maybe” (might say) and “never” responses to *get*-passive sentences within each age group.
- Found a significantly higher preference for *get*-passives in the 18-30 age group (54.17% “yes” responses; 17.94% “never”) as compared to the 30+ age group (39.29% “yes”; 35.32% “never”). Thus, the hypothesis was supported.

### Discussion

- Given the informal nature of *get*-passives, respondents may have rejected some examples of *get*-passives that they would in fact use in everyday speech. It is thus possible that respondents would in fact use *get*-passives even more than was shown by the survey.
  - Survey was distributed almost entirely at the university or to university students.
  - May have skewed the results even further, as informal speech may be considered “less academic.”
  - A different/less academic setting may yield different results.
- Some sentences (e.g. “The glass was shattered”) could be interpreted as being passive (i.e. there was shattered glass everywhere) or active (i.e. someone/ something shattered the glass).
  - Thus, respondents may have accepted such sentences as active sentences even if they would not have accepted them as passives.
  - However, this applied only to the “to be” sentences and so did not affect our hypothesis.
- It may have been beneficial to be clearer in the instructions, i.e. differentiating between what one would say (in spoken discourse) and what one would “use” (which may imply orally or written, or both).

### References

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