



Authenticity: Reaching the hip-hop generation

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The hip-hop culture and risk

To identify effective communications strategies for delivering substance abuse and other "prosocial" behavior messages to African-American, inner-city teenagers, Motivational Education Entertainment (MEE) Productions in Philadelphia carried out more than three months of surveys, focus groups, and interviews with 295 subjects in Washington D.C. and Philadelphia. The focus groups examined messages through rap videos, public services announcements (PSA's) and, discussions of popular films. The surveys assessed the degree of media consumption by the target audience.

The mainstream's well-intentioned messages aimed at African-American youth are reaching the wrong audience. The messages are being heard, but no one is listening, because, as study respondents said, again and again, "No one is really talking to me."

Need to specify target audiences

The failure of education efforts up to now lies in the assumptions upon which communications strategists have based most of the messages to this audience: that there is a homogeneous "street culture"; that inner-city youngsters are making decisions in their mid-to upper teens about whether to engage in self-destructive or antisocial acts; that the dominant culture's linear style of communication is effective for an audience that comes from an oral tradition; and that mainstream society has enough credibility with this audience to dispense super-parental injunctions like "Just say no!" and "Stay in school." It is not that simple.

"Street culture" dissolves upon close observation into a series of overlapping subcultures: drug cultures, hip-hop cultures, gang cultures, sex cultures and age-defined cultures whose common traits and needs are very different from those assumed by outsiders. On the streets, where childhood can be very brief, decisions about drug use and other behaviors are made much earlier than the mainstream culture imagines.

And the mainstream assumption that the streets harbor rudderless, leaderless young people, yearning for a catch phrase upon which to focus their lives, is treated with the derision it probably merits. This culture has its leaders. It has a social structure. But like the white counterculture movement of the 1960's, African-American, inner-city teenagers are far more certain of who they are not than who they are, and their efforts at self-definition, even when this includes behaviors they know to be antisocial and self-destructive, are defended on grounds that they are, at least, authentic.

Authenticity is the key to reaching this audience. But it is a mutating target whose powerful engine is the hip-hop culture. This music-centered, male-dominated, rebellious voice of urban youth shapes - and is shaped - by the language, culture, fashion and world view of a generation alienated not only from the Eurocentric dominant culture, but to a surprising degree from its own African-American heritage.

Hip-Hop is in many respects a classic youth subculture, rejecting the norms and values of the mainstream, measuring success in terms of peer approval and equating power with the ability to influence the subculture's constantly changing insider cues, tastes and values. Its strengths are energy and creativity. Its major weakness is its demand for uncritical adherence to its orthodoxies as a condition of acceptance, a shortcoming rendered all the more hazardous by the culture's macho encouragement of risk-taking substance abuse, promiscuity, being a "street player."

The oppressive orthodoxy of the streets creates a "spiral of silence," which inhibits the free discussion of controversial issues. Under these conditions even majority opinions can become suppressed and individuals will rarely voice concerns about particular behaviors if to do so risks breaking the taboo about judging the actions of others. The dread expulsion from the only community open to them makes seemingly innocent advice - like "Just say no!" - highly threatening to inner city teens. From their perspective, to say no is being perceived as rejecting not only a particular behavior, but also the peer group itself. Since it is the peer group that sanctions behavior, it is the peer group that must be seen talking about dangerous and antisocial behaviors in a "safe" and authentic context.

An obvious corollary to this dependence upon peer approval is that no immutable code of behavior is possible. The best that can be achieved is a rough and temporary situational ethic. Any success achieved in changing the behavior of this subculture will need constant and carefully-targeted reinforcement.

Communication strategies

Despite a high regard for oral communication skills and the power of argument there is a literal-mindedness among young urban African-Americans that makes analogy, hyperbole, and other indirect forms of argumentation poor tools for conveying a message to them. Teens watched with rapt attention a graphic public service message show-

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ing a laboratory rat dying from crack cocaine, but dismissed it anti-drug message on the grounds that "I ain't no rat." Similarly, the meaning of a phrase from the Afrocentric rap song "Black is a color, 'blackness' a state of mind" could not be explained by even the oldest members of a focus group.

The universal teenage rejection of authority extends in the street culture even to an admired celebrity. Inner city teens would be delighted to meet their favorite NBA star if he came to their school to speak against drugs. But they would discount the appearance as "playing the game."

Study results showed that on average, African-American teens from low-income families, usually households with unemployed single parents, consume two or three movies a month, buy one to two rap albums or compact disc a month and combined with other households members, watch more than 70 hours of TV a week. VCR ownership was more than 94 percent versus the national average of 71 percent. A large number of inner city youths spend more time watching media programming than they spend in school, with their parents in church, and on reading combined.

The African-American urban teen culture rarely turns to printed messages, which, with their mainstream, linear character and slow dissemination are not appropriate vehicles for behavior-related messages. The linear character of typical public service announcements and the mainstream image of the medium also limit the use of television.

Ninety-seven percent of urban, African-American teens like and listen to rap music, and more than 90 percent watch rap videos on a regular basis. This latest manifestation of the African-American oral tradition combines rhythmic repetition, one of the most successful education tools known, with "street" acceptance and exponentially growing popularity. However, some issues must be addressed before rap can be used as an educational vehicle: music videos are costly to make and enjoy only brief popularity; songs seen as too "deep" or message-laden are not accepted as "party songs" suitable for sharing, and complex lyrics require too much attention.

Like a dog chasing its own tail

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demically is that the city still spends its money according to an out-dated sense of what and where the epidemic is, a sense that doesn't fully recognize the impact of the epidemic on gay, bisexual and transgendered people of color, and on youth of color, sexual minority youth of color, drug users and people in recovery, and women, primarily women of color. Probably more disturbing is that a number of agencies providing services to these populations don't have staffing levels in any way proportionate to the task they are being asked to perform. In some instances, there are agencies which claim to do services to these populations but don't even have a clue on how to address these issues in an effective way.

Most of us know that HIV is a social disease, and not one which can be prevented simply by teaching people information that by itself has no meaning to them. Some

Movies, with their ability to address "R-rated" topics, develop characters, and explore situations, appear to be good, if extremely expensive, vehicles for this very movie-oriented audience. But with long production lead times a movie's slang, style, and music quickly becomes obsolete.

It is interesting to note that focus group respondents did not perceive movies as having messages. When asked to describe the message in *Boyz n the Hood*, many could not think of one or guessed incorrectly. It was evident, however, that many of the messages in the film had indeed gotten through as a kind of living experience. For instance, some respondents said that they had no idea HIV could be transmitted via oral sex until they saw the scene in which the characters discuss it.

Conclusion

To be successful in communicating risk messages to the hip-hop generation, HIV educators must first recognize that they are most fundamentally dealing with cross-cultural communication; that despite its appearance as a monolingual society, the United States has become multilingual. Part of this recognition is understanding that a minority culture like African-American youth may have not only its own communication style, but also unique notions about the role of communication itself. Second, educators must understand the role of women in shaping and supporting values in a culture defined by an overwhelming orientation toward male images and manifestations.

Finally, although urban youth have been the focus of much social science research, educators remain ignorant of basic information concerning the dynamics of hip-hop culture, that is, how it functions in action. To fill this gap, ethnographic research like this study must continue to define how messages are used, misused, and diffused among African-American urban youth.

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HIV/AIDS prevention groups don't seem to know that, though.

So the CPG operates with a high level of anxiety, knowing that a number of obstacles have to be overcome before they can come up with a community prevention plan that meets the goals set by the CDC.

The CPG has established several subcommittees--focusing special attention on the needs of people of color, men who have sex with men, youth, women, adolescents, people with disabilities, homeless people, HIV+ people, and other "special populations"--and meets at least twice per week. The subcommittees will soon be soliciting more public input through discussion groups, interviews and community forums. I encourage the readers of this article to take part in this very important endeavor. Your life, the lives of your children and loved ones, and the survival of our communities, depends on our success in coming up with the right plan of action.