

UrbanTrends

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THE STATE OF BLACK TV: CHOICES BEYOND BROADCAST



In a recent issue of *UrbanTrends*, we talked about marketing to African American television viewers. In this issue, we take a brief look at the current state of "Black" TV shows, particularly marketed to this community. What kind of shows are out there this year?

The so-called "urban sitcoms" have been popular viewing choices for Black Americans. The WB and UPN networks, where you can often find African American viewers on a typical evening (instead of "The Big Three" networks), have been successful by carving out a niche and targeting programming to urban markets. Shows such as *The Parkers* (the top-rated show in Black households), *Moesha* and *The Jamie Foxx Show* have been among those cited in MEE focus groups about TV viewing habits. Yet, those shows recently came under attack by filmmaker Spike Lee, who accused them of perpetuating racial stereotypes, a theme he also explores in his latest film, *Bamboozled*.

Some believe that the quality of Black TV shows has actually improved over the past few years, as the programs with the most offensively stereotypical portrayals had low ratings; viewers voted them down by flipping the dial. They point out that, for the most part, the characters on Black TV today are in or approaching America's middle class. The shows are also less reliant on jokes about sex than in the past; at least two feature married couples, and *Moesha* often touches on issues of sexual responsibility.

Yet, characters remain who are not far removed from the "pimp daddy" or sexy, sassy mama-with-major-attitude-mode. Lee has particular enmity for the Eddie Murphy-produced "the PJ's," which he said makes fun of the "whole pathology of lower-income African Americans living in the projects." Supporters of such storylines say that "poor Black people" are a reality in America, and that the show actually criticizes the "system" that holds them down, rather than making fun of them. Lee will have his chance to put his art where his mouth is as he fulfills a recent development deal with Studio USA, the primetime production arm of the USA Network. His first focus will be to develop an hour-long drama, a type of show which has traditionally been a hard sell to Black viewers.

Debates about the content of shows being developed for Black viewers will doubtless continue to rage, as will the dispute over who controls the images of African Americans in not just television, but also in the movie and music industries. Promoting "good" Black programming correctly increases the odds that we will have a different conversation about the state of Black TV in the future. The verdict is out on whether African American viewers will consistently support quality programming that reflects the subtleties and realities of their lives,

because as of yet, there are too few shows in any given year to comprise a reasonable sample size. Whatever is produced, finding an audience for it is the critical step in successful entertainment marketing.

Effective ethnic and multicultural marketing will be a key strategy in building market share. (See *UrbanTrends Vol. 8*, for MEE's unique model.) African Americans are known to be huge TV viewers, and at the same time, there has been a huge increase in their buying power over the past decade. Therefore, producers (and their advertisers) are beginning to "see the light" and are targeting them as a new source of viewers and revenue. Even programs with all-White casts have begun to reach out to and court more Black viewers, especially once shows reach syndication. They have employed communications experts like MEE to generate significant

...Continued on page 2

What's Inside

REPORTING ON THE STATE OF BLACK TV

... PAGE 1

SURFING THE STREETS: THE INTERNET AND URBAN AMERICA

... PAGE 2

PREVENTING TEEN DATING VIOLENCE THROUGH BETTER COMMUNICATIONS

... PAGE 4

HOW HEALTHY IS THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY?

... PAGE 5

From The Editor

What do people choose to do with what seems to be our ever-dwindling free time? Entertainment and relaxation choices continue to evolve in America. TV ratings have begun to slide, as some viewers opt for surfing the Internet instead of sitting in front of the television. But the question is whether poor and urban populations are being left behind in the wake of a "digital divide." Nevertheless, there are still millions for whom regular television viewing is a major form of entertainment. Are they looking for quality programs that realistically portray their lives and culture, or an escape that lets them forget for a time the challenges of daily living? Is it possible to do both? In this issue, we give a brief overview of the current state of Black TV.

Also, as most of us struggle to win the "battle of the bulge," public health officials realize that being out of shape has more serious consequences than not being able to fit into that "favorite outfit." The long-term health issues that result from inactivity and bad eating have personal, social and financial costs that must be addressed. This issue uncovers a few of the reasons that African Americans find themselves with greater health risks than other groups.

As always, we hope you find something in this issue that forces you to take a second look at inner city life or makes you think about things in a different way. *UrbanTrends* strives to shed new light on urban populations as being not just a potential target market, but as individuals struggling to make their way in a society that has not always presented a level playing field.

Enjoy!



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Black TV (continued)

"word of mouth" about the television shows that they want African Americans to watch and support. The industry is realizing that "how you say it" is just as important as "what you say."

To "create a buzz" in urban and ethnic markets, messages must be developed to reach the audience both respectfully and responsibly. Culturally-relevant research that uncovers the unique characteristics of urban African American consumers is the foundation for effectively delivering your message directly to them, whether it's selling a product, promoting a film, or changing behavior. Smart marketers realize that they need accurate, up-to-date portraits of the urban consumer in order to make effective strategic decisions about messages used to promote their products and services. They need to know both the current state of the market (including the social context, attitudes and values that affect choices) and be ahead of the upcoming trends. (Look for

details on the social context of Urban America in a multi-part series starting in the next issue of UT).

Once a marketer has developed an understanding of the audience he or she is trying to reach, it becomes much easier to develop a game plan for generating word-of-mouth. Two strategies that MEE has successfully implemented are: promotions on urban/R & B/hip-hop radio stations, using DJs (who have a high degree of credibility in urban communities) to spread the message; and community mobilization and outreach, including using street teams to publicize programs by putting materials directly into the hands of those who make the viewing decisions within their households. A comprehensive, well thought-out, and culturally-relevant marketing strategy always results in "moving the numbers," whether the goal is selling a product or promoting a wide range of ideas and programming, from HIV testing to major films and television shows.



☛ **Too often the media prefers the stereotype to the authentic black experience. After a while whites don't know the difference. The original Bill Cosby television show was criticized for being "unrealistic" and "not black enough." ...What's unrealistic about a black family where the father is a physician and the mother a lawyer?...What's "not black enough" about blacks who appreciate the life, culture, and heritage of their people? The Cosby show was criticized because it refused to play to the stereotypes, while shows like *In Livin' Color*, and *Martin* are celebrated by media critics for doing just that. Black men in drag, pistol-packing mamas, hoods in the hood, and female dancers who can bump and grind with the best of 'em—now, that's an authentic picture of black life in America.**

It's the Little Things: The Everyday Interactions that Get Under the Skin of Blacks and Whites, by Lena Williams, Harcourt, 2000.

Celebrating a Tradition . . . Pass It On!



Kwanzaa is celebrated from December 26 to January 1. The seven principles of Kwanzaa: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith, are not just for the holiday season, but are being embraced year round in the African American community. As one community leader put it, "Once you learn the 'why' and the 'how,' you will always celebrate Kwanzaa and its principles."

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Visit www.meekwanzaakit.com or www.meeproductions.com

Surfing the Streets: The Internet and Urban America

In an effort to determine critical factors behind the well-publicized "digital divide," MEE has conducted focus group and secondary research across the country with African American students and working adults, ages 20 to 45. Participants had modest incomes and at least some familiarity with personal computers (PCs) and the Internet, whether at home, work, or in public settings such as libraries or recreation centers.

Access to computer technology is being touted as the future for exchanging information and making money, and is, according to Rev. Jesse Jackson, "the newest stage of the civil rights struggle." Therefore, it is critical to understand the key factors affecting computer ownership and Internet access. MEE particularly wanted to explore current and/or potential reasons why African Americans use computers and the Internet, along with their comfort levels with computers and Internet services.

Some of the key findings of our qualitative research have recently been expanded on by a national quantitative research survey conducted by the Washington-based Pew Internet and American Life Project. That report said that more Blacks are using the Internet, but that the digital divide, while getting smaller, still exists. The number of African Americans surfing the Web surged last year. According to the Pew study, 3.5 million African Americans started using the Internet in the last year, bringing the estimated total number of Blacks online to about 7.5 million. That number represents 36% of African Americans, compared to 50% of all White adults who use the Internet.

Some additional "snapshots" from MEE's research:

- Most participants in our survey sample use their computers both at home and at work. Very few of the participants did not have at least some reasonable access to PCs and the Internet.
- Our participants use the Internet in a wide variety of ways. The most frequently mentioned use was *entertainment-related*. The Pew study confirmed this, showing that Blacks were 69% more likely than Whites to

have listened to music on the Web and 38% more likely to have downloaded music files. Students and other participants who used a PC for work were most likely to use the Internet for research purposes.

- We found a high degree of sophistication among our participants, both in the regular use of a PC and their online experience in the work environment and at home. Younger participants, especially college graduates, see their future as based on a high level of dependency on PCs, similar even to the telephone. They are also more creative in using the Internet and are more likely to access it for almost everything.
- Older males and females are more likely to get online for specific reasons, such as to look for job information. Many participants, particularly older females, described an initial obsession period when they first bought their computers, which subsided after a few months of being online.
- Male participants throughout the age groups took more pleasure in and notice of the technical aspects of being online. They were much more likely to discuss buying computer equipment online and/or downloading software.
- Despite nearly unanimous mention of concerns regarding security online, the vast

majority of participants have made purchases online, especially in the areas of electronics, travel and music.

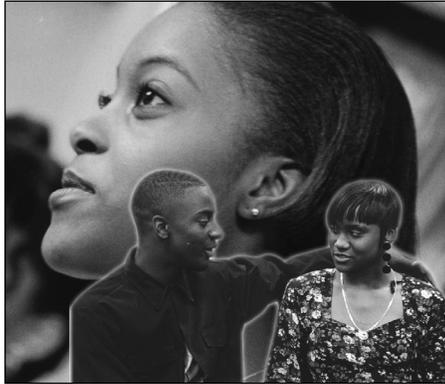
As with other emerging trends, there are market opportunities related to these findings. Developers who create content and Websites targeted to African Americans, whether for information or entertainment, are poised to take advantage of the increasing numbers of Black Web users. Many "surfers" are still seeking Websites they can go to for the information they need and deserve. As word-of-mouth spreads about the many things that can now be accomplished online, we can count on seeing user-numbers increase, especially among those for whom cost and access is less of an issue.

Community-based education programs, along with increasing the number of computer access points in urban communities, can increase African Americans' interest in getting online. In order to effectively promote the benefits of being connected to the world through the Internet, all off-line outreach to the community must, however, be short, concise and culturally-relevant. Incentives, such as contests and DJ-driven radio promotions, can also be used to drive people to Websites where their needs can be met.



• Black conservative Mike Green, in "The Digital Divide is a Voluntary Gap," argues that the digital divide is a myth that was "concocted to continue coddling the poor and minorities" and to get the federal government more involved in people's private lives. He insists that Black children are not deprived: "They have stereos, but not computers. They have books, but not computers...the same parents who complain their children do not have a fancy computer at home will instead spend money on cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, expensive sports clothing and fancy cars."

COMMUNICATIONS: A RISK FACTOR FOR TEEN DATING VIOLENCE?



Teen dating violence (TDV) is a public health problem that receives little attention in the adult world. It is a difficult phenomenon to grasp because, for the most part, it is understudied and rarely reported. We do know, however, that intimate partner/teen dating violence is a reality for today's young people. According to a poll by Children Now/Kaiser Permanente, 40% of teenage girls ages 14 to 17 reported knowing someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend. A U.S. Department of Education report estimated that there are 4,000 incidents of rape or other types of sexual assault in public schools across the country each year.

Given the fact that children model what they see at home, it is disturbing that many of them grow up seeing their parents settle the frictions that come with any intimate partnership by resorting to physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Slightly more than half of adult female victims of intimate violence are mothers of children under the age of 12, as reported in a U.S. Department of Justice study.

There is a need to increase awareness of and responsibility for the problem of teen dating violence at all levels of the community. In order to be successful, however, that awareness must filter down to the individual teen and his/her peer group, because within urban youth culture, it is peers that sanction and establish the norms of acceptable behavior. It is only when peers make non-violence in dating relationships the "standard," that it will gain final acceptance.

In its comprehensive study *In Search of Love: Dating Violence Among Urban Youth*, MEE examined the cultural and communications dynamics of Black urban teens, ages 16-18, that allow, support, and even encourage violence in male/female dating

relationships. It viewed race, culture and communication as central factors to understanding male-female dating interactions during the teen and young adult years. In follow-up interviews with youth-service providers in Atlanta, MEE found that providers believe that a lack of coordination between agencies, and a lack of resources for detailed tracking cause TDV victims and/or offenders to be lost within the system. They also felt that, unless adjudicated, there did not seem to be any viable way to force participation of offenders in treatment programs, or to require victims to seek support or counseling. Overall, providers felt that the problem of TDV is not taken as seriously as it should be by their agencies or the community in general, with the underlying sentiment being a level of denial by many adults and leaders in the community.

Awareness trainings, such as those MEE has been conducting for youth-service providers, health professionals, educators, probation officers, and program directors can help expose TDV more widely as a public health issue. In addition, various ways of "how you say it" must be explored. MEE, for example, is developing a full-length, fictional script and film treatment, "Hard Love," which disseminate positive messages to young people on their own self-defined, market-driven level. The goal is to speak to the target audience in its own language and in a matter that makes them comfortable in confronting the sensitive issues within their own communities. Another strategy is to involve historically-Black colleges, community colleges and trade schools, educating older peers, who have significant influence on their younger peers, about positive, non-confrontational ways to deal with relationship tensions.

There are currently few public health messages stating that "it's OK to talk about, deal with, and get help for" dating violence among teens. It is essential, therefore, to create an environment of change and/or recovery – one that lets young males know that there are other ways of "being a man" besides dominating their partner and resorting to violence, and tells young females to respect themselves enough to stop and walk away from an abusive relationship.

DidYouKnow?

Black Enterprise recently released its list of the Top 50 colleges for African American students. In conjunction with DayStar Research, the magazine conducted research and asked professionals in the field to rate nearly 1,000 colleges and universities with a Black population of at least 1.5%. The poll included historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Ivy League schools, and small, regional and large institutions, both private and public. Criteria included test scores, location, reputation of the institution, ethnic composition, and likelihood a student will graduate with a college degree in four years. The top five, in order: Spelman College; Morehouse College; Florida A&M University; Clark Atlanta University; and Howard University.

(Black Enterprise)

A middle school in Hamilton, Georgia equated Afrocentric gear with that bearing a likeness of the Confederate flag, at least when it comes to what its students can wear without offending others. After a group of White students were suspended for wearing shirts with the Confederate flag, their parents temporarily convinced school officials that Black students wearing clothing with the hip-hop FUBU (For Us, By Us) logo were just as likely to offend their peers. The principal later reversed the decision, saying that she did not consider FUBU clothes, which hip-hoppers of all races sport, with the Confederate flag, which many African Americans and other U.S. citizens feel symbolizes racial hatred. She decided, however, to ban both in an effort to defuse tensions at the school.

(Associated Press)



The Health of Our Community: Physical Activity and Nutrition

Most Americans talk a good game about health, yet statistics show that our actions many times do not mirror what we say. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that the number of overweight children has more than doubled in the last three decades, with 12.5% of Americans between the ages of 6 and 17 being overweight or obese. Data for adults reflect that many Americans are also heavier and more out of shape than ever.

African Americans are disproportionately affected by certain diseases and conditions related to this reality, including diabetes and high blood pressure. As with all populations, their level of physical activity, along with their eating habits (and possibly some genetic predisposition) determines their susceptibility to these diseases. Among racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., for example, African American women have the highest prevalence of being overweight. In addition, African American youth have the least amount of physical activity levels when compared with other racial groups. Traditional soul food eating, which can include high amounts of fat, sugar and salt, also contributes to increased risk of cardiovascular disease and other health problems.

MEE has conducted focus group research on African American adolescents and college students to determine their eating habits and attitudes towards physical activity and nutrition. The research focused on developing effective strategies to promote behavior change in young people. By starting with youth, health officials may have a better chance at getting them to adopt lifestyle changes that can benefit their health, both now and in the future.

MEE's research revealed that today's Black youth and young adults, like their White counterparts, are not getting enough exercise and are not eating nutritiously. Black males, for example, tend to consume most of their meals outside of the home, usually from fast food restaurants found at or near school. This same trend occurred among college students, who remarked that they were "surrounded" by fast food restaurants on and around their campuses. Other findings included:

- Many urban youth pick junk food for a snack, as opposed to fresh fruit, even though they know that fruit is a healthier alternative. They said that junk food tastes good and fills them up.
- Few participants said they ate breakfast at home. A significant portion said they skipped breakfast altogether, because they do not have enough time, want their sleep, or are not that hungry early in the morning.
- Parents play a significant role in the eating habits of youth. We found that those young people who were most aware of and



valued eating healthy did so primarily because it was emphasized at home.

Consistent physical activity also seems to be a neglected area among youth of color. Many young males start off as members of organized team sports. Research participants who were not on school or community teams claimed to play basketball, football or baseball regularly with friends. Other than sports, it was rare to hear a participant discuss any type of physical activity for exercise or fun. None walked, ran, swam, played tennis or rode their bike with any regularity (especially once they had access to a car). Once they passed the age of organized school sports (around age 18, unless recruited for college or the pros), most would drop them altogether, with no other physical activity to

replace it. Basketball and football are sports that most young men give up on a regular basis once they get into their twenties or thirties. Therefore, youth need to be exposed to a wider variety of physical fitness and exercises that they can use over a lifetime.

Many barriers keep African Americans from exercising. They include both excuses and myths about exercise. For example:

- Some African Americans believe that exercise is only for young people or for the rich, who have more time and energy, and the money to afford health club memberships.
- With all they have to deal with as urban residents, along with their family and other responsibilities, Black women, in particular, report that they just do not have enough time to exercise. Plus, for some, rest is considered more important than exercise, when they're already juggling so many things in their lives; they report that they are too tired to exercise, or believe that exercise makes you more tired.
- Others say that their lives are already stressful enough, and that exercise just adds to that stress.
- Some say that they already get enough physical activity from caregiving, house-keeping and workday activities.

Innovative programs which reflect the lives Black people are living today will be most effective in changing their health outlooks. There is a lack of culturally-relevant health messages designed to raise awareness among people of color about the benefits of healthy eating and physical activity. More programs need to be designed which incorporate some form of physical activity into their lives. The key is to develop activities which people enjoy and feel comfortable doing, such as using traditional African or hip-hop dance classes to get people to start moving. New education and awareness messages will help people understand the benefits and importance of taking care of their bodies, eating right and exercising.

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**Coming to you in the next
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We will explore such topics as:

**WHERE TO FIND TOMORROW'S
BLACK DOCTORS**

**AFRICAN AMERICAN WEALTH:
THE FINANCIAL DIVIDE**

**CONTEXTS OF AN URBAN
EXISTENCE**

**MOBILIZING A COMMUNITY
THROUGH ITS GRASSROOTS
ORGANIZATIONS**

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