

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ACCULTURATION, LANGUAGE, AND MEDIA PREFERENCES AMONG BICULTURAL MEXICAN-AMERICAN YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Health disparities involving Mexican-American youth can be addressed through social marketing efforts, but interventions must be carefully adapted to be effective. To explore key variables that can affect success, a study was conducted with 269 Mexican-American youth to examine acculturation; language and media use; and preference for tobacco counteradvertisements in English, Spanish, and a combination. Results showed that although a large percentage identified with the Mexican-American rather than the White-American culture and spoke Spanish in selected contexts, preference was greater for tobacco counteradvertisements in English. This finding runs counter to suggestions from some marketers that bicultural youth may be more likely to favor ads in Spanish.

Background

The growing population of Mexican-American youth, combined with disparities in health and education, present considerable challenges to those involved in public policy. While tobacco use among other ethnic youth declined in the past decade, Latino youth smoking has increased [4], and dropout rates for 10th and 12th graders are more than double that of non-Hispanic youth [1]. Social marketing has demonstrated its potential to address such public policy issues by shaping public discussion and reducing disparities; however, social-marketing interventions must be formulated with care – campaigns that have not been adapted carefully run the risk of increasing rather than decreasing the health disparity [2].

In the context of a Mexican-American youth audience, few studies have been conducted to determine effective ways of adapting health messages. Factors that have great potential to influence the impact of health messages include the target's level of acculturation; preferred language and media in various contexts; and language used in health messages. The present study contributes substantively to the literature by gathering data on these components as part of a larger social-marketing study to examine the attitudes of Mexican-American youth toward tobacco counteradvertisements. The data will enable

public-health advocates and policy makers to develop more effective messages and interventions for this audience, and in so doing, to diminish the health divide.

Method

The study was conducted with 269 7th- and 8th-grade youth in a California/Mexico border community. Students were shown a series of tobacco prevention ads in English, Spanish, and a combination of English and Spanish in the same ad. Participants then answered questions on which ads were most appealing, effective, and easiest to understand; and which language they would use if they had to create an anti-tobacco campaign aimed at youth in their community. Participants also answered questions pertaining to demographics, ethnic identification, language use, participation in cultural activities, and language of media used by the respondent in selected contexts. The culture- and language-related questions were based on an orthogonal scale, which allows levels of identification with multiple cultures to be measured independently of each other and can therefore indicate the extent of biculturalism [3].

Results

Approximately 50% of respondents preferred English-only tobacco counteradvertisements and felt they were most effective, and over half thought they were the easiest to understand. The second most-favored ads were those that combined Spanish and English. When asked what language they would use in designing an anti-tobacco campaign, English-only and Spanish-only got very few responses, whereas nearly 50% selected “some in English and some in Spanish,” and 40% selected “both English and Spanish in the same ad.” Participants identified significantly more with the Mexican-American culture than with the White-American culture. While a large percentage spoke Spanish at home and with friends “some” or “a lot,” respondents still were more likely to use English media in certain contexts. Anglo-culture identification was positively related to the use of English communication and media, and negatively related to the use of Spanish communication and media. Also, the number of years living in Mexico was positively related to the use of Spanish communication and media, and negatively related to the use of English communication and media.

Implications

Results indicate that it may be a mistake to think that bicultural Latino youth can be reached most effectively through Spanish-language advertisements, as suggested by some [5]. However, it is unclear whether ads should be presented in a combination of English and Spanish (which youth indicated they would choose if designing a campaign), or in English only (which was perceived as easiest to understand). Additional experimental research is planned that will more directly measure attitude toward ads in English, Spanish, and in a combination of English and Spanish. A better understanding of these issues will enable social marketers, public health advocates, and policy makers to take important steps toward closing disparities and improving the future for Latino youth.

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