

# **Synthesis of Learning across 3 Years of Concept and Message Testing among African American Tweens and Parents**

Formative audience testing has been a critical component of the VERB™ campaign's development, driving its content, tone, and implementation. Before new advertising is launched, concept testing is conducted to validate the communication strategy and aid in the selection of concepts that resonate strongly with the target audience; are acceptable, understandable, culturally appropriate, and motivating; and have few unintended effects. After an advertising concept is produced, message testing is conducted to explore the target audience's reactions to specific concepts; to determine which messages the target audience finds understandable, relevant, appealing, unique, and motivating; and to identify anything that is confusing or controversial. Though much of this information gleaned from the testing is specific to each ad idea, these data contain a wealth of valuable information about key target audiences— tweens and parents— that can be used to help shape other health communication efforts on physical activity.

Two reviewers from the VERB evaluation team independently analyzed qualitative investigation reports from both the concept and message testing to identify recurrent themes and recommendations among each audience segment. In this report, findings are presented for African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, and American Indian tweens, their parents, and other adult influencers. Health communication practitioners can utilize these findings to assist them in developing more effective, culturally competent, and appropriate messages that encourage physical activity among youth.

## **Findings for African American Audiences**

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The following thematic summary is generated from focus groups and individual interviews with African American children and their parents that were conducted as part of the VERB campaign's message development process. These themes were derived from the reports that were generated from five rounds of qualitative data collection conducted between September 2002 and May 2004. The reports covered both concept and message testing for ads promoting physical activity among tweens (children aged 9–3 years) and their parents/influencers. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics and methods for each investigation. Participants took part in focus groups or in-depth interviews in which they shared their responses to the ideas for each television, print, and radio ad. The resulting reports were then analyzed for their overarching themes and concepts, which are presented here. It is our hope that these findings can be used to support and inform the development of concepts and messages that promote physical activity among African American tweens and encouragement from their parents to be physically active, leading to more culturally sensitive messaging and effective physical activity promotion for this audience.

Please note: Qualitative techniques have certain limitations. These investigations are exploratory in nature; that is, they are used to stimulate dialogue, elicit a range of responses, generate ideas, and drive message development. Because of the limited number of participants, unstructured questioning procedures, and the potential for one respondent's opinions to influence those of other respondents, the formative investigation findings reported here should not be considered conclusive or generalizable. The findings contained in this report represent insights gleaned from 3 years of qualitative investigations for the development of messages for a physical activity campaign. When applying these findings within your community and situation, they should be viewed within the context of their limitations.

**Table 1. Methods and Participant Characteristics**

<b>Location and Date</b>	<b>Method*</b>	<b>Number Conducted</b>	<b>Target Audience</b>	<b>Length of Interview/Focus Group</b>
<b>Philadelphia, PA September 2002</b>	In-depth interview	9	4 <sup>th</sup> -7th grade girls and boys	20 minutes
	Mini focus group	2	Mothers of 4th-7th grade girls and boys	30 minutes
	Focus group	2	Mothers of 4th-7th grade girls and boys	30 minutes
<b>Atlanta, GA July 2002</b>	Focus group	4	6th and 7th grade girls and boys	90 minutes
	In-depth interview	8	6th – and 7th grade girls and boys	45 minutes
	Telephone Focus group	3	Mothers of children ages 9-12 years	75 minutes
<b>Chicago, IL June 2003</b>	Mini focus group	12	6th -7th grade girls and boys	1 hour
	Mini focus group	4	Mothers of 4th -7th grade girls and boys	1 hour

<b>Los Angeles, CA  August 2003</b>	In-depth interview	10	4 <sup>th</sup> - 7th grade girls and boys	30 minutes
	Mini focus group	4	Mothers of 4th–7th grade girls and boys	30 minutes
<b>Los Angeles, CA  March 2004</b>	Focus group	2	Mothers of 4th–7th grade girls and boys	1.25 hours
	Focus group	2	Male adult influencers	1.25 hours
<b>Los Angeles, CA  May 2004</b>	Focus group	1	Mothers of female tweens	1 hour
	Focus group	1	Mothers of male tweens	1 hour
	Focus group	1	Male adult influencers	1 hour
	Focus group	1	Male adult influencers	1 hour

\* Focus groups comprised at least six participants; mini focus groups comprised four participants; and in-depth interviews were conducted one-on-one.

## **Thematic Summary of African American Findings**

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✓ **Use audio and visual cues that convey an upbeat, positive tone.**

African American tweens and parents responded favorably to ads that generated feelings of happiness, fun, and the excitement of being active! Tweens cited physical activity as a way to combat boredom and requested that ads featuring children show them smiling, laughing, and with a carefree demeanor. Parents were also attracted to the sight and sound of happy children. Tween audiences were inspired the most by ads with upbeat music (e.g., rap music) and print ads with bold, bright colors. Parents also mentioned that ads should use bright, “vibrant” colors as a way of reinforcing a positive tone, adding that dull colors do not match the positive message of being physically active.

✓ **Messages should be clear and easy to understand.**

Messages that resonated strongest with African American tweens and their parents were those that achieved a certain degree of clarity and simplicity that made it easy to interpret their meanings. To reach this level of clarity, ads promoting physical activity should clearly display activities so that audiences can identify the activity and how it is performed. Audio cues should support video cues so that they work together to portray the main message of the ad. Messages should be singular, presenting a unified thought supported by images and sounds. Additionally, narrators should speak slow enough to be understood, but without using a dull, boring tone.

✓ **Advertisements are more effective when audiences can personally identify with them.**

It is important for African American tweens to be able to identify with the activities and environments depicted in ads. Tweens identified best with ads that demonstrated activities they could actually do. They enjoyed seeing new activities and activities that were familiar, such as those they might do on a daily basis. However, tween audiences emphasized a preference for seeing new activities that were realistic, particularly with the imagery used. For example, one respondent asked, “How can you twist and run at the same time?” Tweens also pointed out when parks or playgrounds in ads did not look typical of those in their neighborhoods. Similarly, parent audiences believed that ads

should be capable of making them imagine their children doing what the children in the ads do. Like tween respondents, they also expressed the need to see communities like their own featured in ads. However, parents responded negatively to ads that perpetuated stereotypes by portraying African American communities as low income or poverty stricken.

✓ **Avoid messages that may lead to violence.**

Troubleshoot all ads that may contain images or situations that could potentially lead to violence or injury among tween audiences. African American tween respondents who viewed print ads observed several subtle actions and situations that they indicated could motivate their peers to fight or become otherwise violent. This was most apparent when tweens believed that one's personal space was somehow being violated. For example, they quickly identified a child tapping another child on the shoulder and on the head as potentially leading to a fight. Another ad that demonstrated an alternative use of a neighborhood basketball court also generated a negative response, because tweens often have to compete with older youth and adults for space on courts. Alternatively, tweens had an overwhelmingly positive response to ads that showed groups of children playing together peacefully.

✓ **Avoid physical activities that appear dangerous.**

African American parents and tweens were both concerned with ads that depicted dangerous activities, such as break-dancing on concrete. Several tweens responded negatively to ads that promoted swimming: some of the tweens feared drowning or holding their breath; whereas others thought that swimming required too much skill. It is unknown whether the children who participated in this focus group had not learned to swim or did not consider themselves to be strong swimmers. Parents also responded unfavorably to ads that depicted dangerous situations, such as going to the park alone, but they appreciated ads that showed children being supervised by an adult.

✓ **Messages should promote individuality.**

African American tweens liked ads that inspired their freedom of choice and preserved their individuality. Ads that used a variety of physical activities in which tweens were encouraged to pick their own games produced positive responses from tween participants.

They liked games that let them have their own unique style. In addition, tweens felt empowered by these activities, contrasting them with games that required them to be told what to do, such as “Simon Says.”

✓ **Guilt as a motivator for encouraging physically active?**

Ads that used guilt to motivate parents to encourage their children to be physically active generated two types of responses. For some parents, it was a positive motivator, letting them know that just because they may have been unsuccessful in the past in getting their children active, they should try again and not give up. Other parents, however, felt like they had to defend their level of involvement with their children. Several participating parents responded favorably to messages that stimulated self-reflection.

✓ **Make sure that ads are age and gender appropriate.**

Ads developed for tween audiences should appeal to both girls and boys. African American tween respondents distinguished between girl and boy activities and games. Tweens and parents responded negatively when ads used language or depicted activities that were not age appropriate. For example, “crawling” and “sliding” received a negative response from tweens and were viewed as activities for little children. Parents were concerned by ads promoting activities that they believed were too mature for their children or were potentially sexually explicit. African American moms were especially apprehensive about ads that promoted certain dances and movements that might lead to “dirty dancing” or have negative sexual implications, particularly for girls.