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What walking means to moms: Insights from a national sample to frame walking in compelling ways to low-income urban mothers



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ABSTRACT

Population-wide initiatives aim to educate individuals about the benefits of walking, such as *Step It Up!* (United States), *Walking for Health* (England), and *Canada Walks* (Canada). Low-income women are a strategic group to target for walking communications because lower-income individuals and women have lower rates of physical activity than the general population and men. For messages to motivate mothers to walk, however, they need to frame walking in ways that makes walking sufficiently relevant and compelling. We investigated what walking means to low-income urban mothers as a first step toward identifying more compelling and motivating ways to frame and communicate about walking to them. Focus groups were conducted across seven different urban areas in the United States among low-income urban mothers ($n=52$) and transcribed. Grounded theory was used to code and analyze the data. This study identified salient beliefs, barriers, and life concerns that should be addressed when framing and branding walking to low-income urban mothers. Communications emphasizing dose-based recommendations (e.g., time, intensity) are irrelevant to mothers' lives and also appear to be confusing as well as ineffective motivators. While some participants desired experiential benefits from walking, such as time with family, others sought instrumental benefits, such as losing weight. Regardless of the benefits desired, however, there was a general consensus that walking was a low daily priority. Thus, for messages to successfully promote walking, they need to imbue walking with a compelling meaning that makes walking relevant to mothers in ways that can help them achieve their daily needs and wants. In addition, future

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communications should address the potentially negative meanings and stress low-income mothers experience when walking is a compulsory form of transportation. These data offer insights into preliminary suggestions for framing walking to boost its daily relevance, desirability, and usefulness to low-income urban mothers.

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1. Introduction

Walking is a promising strategy to improve public health (Lee and Buchner, 2008) because it is health promoting, accessible, and convenient for most people regardless of their age or health status (Dunton and Schneider, 2006). Individuals who walk are three times more likely to meet recommended levels of physical activity compared to those who do not walk (Berrigan et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Population-wide initiatives aim to educate individuals about walking's benefits, including *Step It Up!*, the U.S. Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2015), *Walking for Health* in England (Walking for Health, 2016), and *Canada Walks* (Green Communities Canada, 2016).

For such initiatives to have the greatest impact, however, it is important to understand how to increase walking among disadvantaged groups who have unfavorable walking trajectories (Barnett et al., 2008). Low-income urban mothers engage in less physical activity than the general population and men (Schiller et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). In addition, mothers are the primary gatekeepers of their children's and family's lifestyle and make 80% of health-related decisions (Kaiser Family Foundation Report, 2011; U.S. Department of Labor, 2013), making them a strategic group to target for increased walking. However, messages promoting walking must effectively motivate action by *gaining the attention* of mothers amongst competing marketing information (Lupia, 2013) and also *persuade* them that walking brings relevant benefits into their daily lives (Segar, 2015).

Traditional strategies and messages to promote walking and physical activity around the world have used dose-response prescriptions based on assumptions that logical outcomes, such as “better health”, “disease prevention”, and “weight control” make walking sufficiently compelling to adopt and sustain. However, after decades utilizing these traditional medically focused messages, progress has been disappointing and physical activity participation remains low across the globe (Carlson et al., 2010; World Health Organization, 2008). In the United States and England, 31% and 34% of individuals, respectively, self-report meeting recommendations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Department of Health, 2011). However, these rates might be severely inflated because accelerometry data show that only 9.6% of Americans, 15% of Canadians, and 5% of adults in England meet recommended levels (Cardinal, 2009; Colley et al., 2011; Tucker et al., 2011). While inactivity is a result of many complex factors (Brownson et al., 2005), there is a need to identify how to make walking more relevant and compelling to individuals, especially among socially disadvantaged groups.

Branding is a promising and strategic approach to improve the framing and promotion of walking (Evans et al., 2015). It purposefully aims to create positive feelings and perceptions about a product, service, or behavior so people will identify with it and desire it over time (Evans and Hastings, 2008). The CDC's VERB “It's What You Do,” campaign effectively used branding to positively influence physical activity attitudes and behaviors of children aged 9–13 years old directly exposed to the campaign two years after the campaign ended (Huhman et al., 2010).

The power of a brand to influence behavior is determined by consumer experiences with that branded behavior (or product), how they experience it, feel about it, and what it means and symbolizes to them. However, it is crucial to understand the dominant narratives and meanings about a behavior *before* formulating frames and targeted communications that brand it (Evans and Hastings, 2008; Frameworks Institute, 2016). The purpose of this study was to understand what walking means and symbolizes to low-income urban mothers within the context of their current daily lives. Specifically, we aimed to 1) identify their most salient daily concerns, 2) understand their assumptions about walking, and 3) explore the role of walking in their daily lives and how they view walking as linking to, facilitating, and/or interfering with their key daily priorities.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants and recruitment

Focus groups were held among a convenience sample of low-income urban mothers in seven urban sites across the United States selected by researchers from the Physical Activity Policy Research Network (PARPN); the recruitment process varied by site. The PARPN is national research network funded by the CDC to study the effectiveness of health policies on increasing physical activity in communities (PARPN, 2014). Focus group leaders worked with local organizations that served low-income communities for participant recruitment in addition to placing flyers in Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) offices and newsletters. Inclusion criteria included being a low-income female caregiver (over 18 years old) of elementary school children (K-5th grade), and living in an urban area, (population density > 50,000). The focus groups were held

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