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Adolescent perceptions of violence: Formative research findings from a social marketing campaign to reduce violence among middle school youth

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Summary *Objective:* To identify the specific barriers and benefits of violent behaviours as noted by middle school youth and to develop a social marketing campaign that attends to the needs and wants of the target audience.
Study design: A non-experimental, qualitative study design was used to assess youth perceptions of violence in a large, southeast urban school district.
Methods: Using a social marketing approach, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with middle school youths, to gain an understanding of perceived barriers and benefits of violent behaviours. Additionally, interviews assessed youth preferences for an effective spokesperson for an anti-violence campaign. Qualitative analysis of coded transcripts revealed key themes that were incorporated into a multi-media initiative.
Results: Critical themes of the research highlighted that the majority of violence occurs at school, during school hours and most of the youths believed the use of violence was necessary to defend themselves from other peers or to protect family members. Another key finding pertained to adolescent views on violent people; although the majority of respondents reported engaging in violent acts, they did not view themselves as violent. Results were used to inform the development of a social marketing campaign designed to reduce youth violence among middle school students in a large, urban central Florida school district.
Conclusion: Findings from the formative research led to the creation and pre-testing of five potential campaign brands. The campaign slogan that tested best with the target audience emphasized the choice youth have to either engage in violent

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behaviour and suffer the consequences or to 'rise above' physical conflict and reap the benefits.
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Introduction

Overview of violent behaviour in the USA

Youth violence remains a significant problem in the United States. For instance, in 2005, 36% of high school students reported having been in a physical fight one or more times during the previous 12 months; 4% sustained injuries from a physical fight that required medical care one or more times in the previous 12 months; 19% reported carrying a weapon at least once during the past 30 days; 5% reported carrying a gun at least once in the last 30 days; 14% were involved in a physical fight on school property one or more times in the past year; 7% reported carrying a weapon on school property on one or more days in the month preceding the survey; 8% were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property at least one time in the year preceding the survey; and 30% had property stolen or intentionally damaged on school property one or more times during the 12 months prior to the survey.[1] Furthermore, in 2004, acts of violence caused more than 750 000 young Americans aged 10–24 to seek emergency department care for their sustained injuries.[2] Violence that occurs on school property results in problems at many levels. Not only are the students who engage in violence affected by in- and out-of-school suspension, but students who witness violence or are the target of violence are also negatively impacted.

The factors contributing to youth violence are multi-faceted and include both individual and community level characteristics. Commonly cited factors include, antisocial attitudes and beliefs, academic failure, aggression, single-parent families, weak social ties, poor parent–child relations, delinquent peers, poverty, neighbourhood crime, and neighbourhood disorganization.[2] The World Report on Violence and Health recommends several measures for decreasing the incidence of violence, many of which focus on the establishment of national policies and plans as well as improved data collection and monitoring systems.[3] The editors also suggest in Recommendation 4 the need to "Promote primary prevention responses… media campaigns to change attitudes, behaviour and social norms" (p. 32).[3] Furthermore, they suggest these primary prevention programmes may have reinforcing effects at other levels.

Whereas the World Health Report examines the context of youth violence at an international level, in the USA the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have established goals and directives to decrease incidence rates. According to Healthy People 2010, youth focused violence prevention programmes need to incorporate strategies to reduce involvement in physical fighting and discourage weapon carrying on school property.[4] Furthermore, such programmes should begin early in life and be tailored to youth of varying social, economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds.[4] In an effort to follow the Healthy People 2010 violence prevention project recommendations, a county health department in central Florida used a social marketing approach to develop a campaign aimed at violence prevention among middle school youth in a large, urban school district. Results from the formative research phase of the project are presented.

Overview of social marketing

Social marketing is the application of traditional marketing principles towards the promotion of health behaviour change.[5] It is based on the traditional marketing exchange theory, which states that consumers will adopt behaviour change when barriers are reduced and benefits highlighted, according to their specific needs.[6] Social marketing manages behaviour change by creating incentives or consequences that invite voluntary exchange. Specifically, social marketers seek to identify barriers to behaviour change and to highlight benefits that are relevant to the audience (e.g., some women breastfeed for the health benefits to the child, other women choose to breastfeed for the unique bond created between mother and child). Like education, marketing offers people a choice about behaviour but unlike education, it assists in altering the environment to make the recommended behaviour more advantageous by communicating the most favourable cost–benefit relation to the target audience.[7,8] One key feature of social marketing is its utilization of formative research. Before communication plans and interventions are developed, data are collected about consumer preferences regarding the health behaviour of interest. Formative research findings then guide the rest of the campaign development.