



Research in Brief

Generating conflict for greater good: Utilizing contingency theory to assess Black and mainstream newspapers as public relations vehicles to promote better health among African Americans[☆]

Crystal Y. Lumpkins^{a,*}, Jiyang Bae^b, Glen T. Cameron^c

^a William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Kansas, Stauffer-Flint Hall, 1435 Jayhawk Blvd. Room 207D, Lawrence, KS 66045, South Korea

^b Department of Advertising and Public Relations, School of Journalism and Advertising, Catholic University of Daegu, South Korea

^c Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri-Columbia, United States

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ABSTRACT

The potential use of strategic conflict management (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006; Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2008) as a health advocacy tool in US African American and mainstream newspapers, arguing that escalation of conflict can increase effectiveness of health-related news releases. For health communicators focusing on at-risk populations with poor health outcomes, such goals would include increased awareness of health problems and solutions, along with increased motivation arising from indignation over health disparities. Content analysis of 1197 stories in 24 Black and 12 mainstream newspapers showed that more conflict factors were present in Black vs. mainstream newspapers, suggesting a way to strategically place health messages in news releases disseminated to newspapers that motivate at-risk publics to better health. The findings suggest that conflict factors such as racial disparity data regarding health issues may enhance media advocacy.

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1. Introduction

Cultural and alternative newspapers are largely influential voices and trusted sources of information in their respective communities. The Black newspaper in particular is one that is an influential and trusted source of information in the African American community; has achieved equal status with other respected social institutions like schools and churches (Brown, 1994; Sylvester, 1993) in many communities across the nation; and has also served as a vehicle to fight racial injustice and preserve African American culture (Lacy, Stephens, & Soffin, 1991). A 2004 national study of Black newspaper readers showed “87.6% of individuals who regularly read Black newspapers do not regularly read mainstream newspapers.” (“New York Amsterdam News,” 2004). The sample consisted of mostly affluent and highly educated respondents. The study revealed that respondents do not trust the mainstream dailies and believed the reporting was “less than fair.” Not only have Black newspapers provided information that reinforces what is important to Black communities but it appears to thrive while mainstream dailies lose circulation (Guitierrez, 2007). A study that examined media coverage on HIV/AIDS in Black and mainstream newspapers suggests African Americans may not rely on coverage from mainstream newspapers

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 785 864 7639; fax: +1 785 864 5318.

E-mail addresses: lumpkins@ku.edu (C.Y. Lumpkins), jiyang.bae@gmail.com (J. Bae), camerong@missouri.edu (G.T. Cameron).

(Pickle, Crouse Quinn, & Brown, 2002). The content analysis also revealed that the Black newspapers appeared to cover issues that were of importance to the African American community but ignored by mainstream media (Pickle et al., 2002 p. 431).

These newspapers however have been untapped resources to strategically address health disparities among African Americans; cancer is one of the second leading causes of death among African Americans (American Cancer Society, 1998, 2000, 2007; Rawls, Lloyd, & Stern, 2001). In a study that examines a national sample of health stories in Black newspapers, cancer stories were the most reported stories and contained more localizing information and also information that could personally mobilize an individual to better health (Cohen et al., 2008). Similar to other traditional tools that health public relations practitioners have utilized such as press releases, newsletters and brochures, the same principles can be applied in the case of tailored efforts directed to newspapers. A study that examined culturally tailored brochures that advocated mammography screening (Springston & Champion, 2004) showed perceived benefits were positively influenced, knowledge about breast cancer and mammography screening increased, and perceived barriers to getting a mammogram were reduced when compared to non-tailored brochures. The role of culture is integral to effectively communicating health issues to diverse audiences and should be a central part of the message (Springston & Champion, 2004). Some scholars argue a culturally sensitive approach is not enough; a culturally centered approach is necessary to positively influence health beliefs and behavior (Dutta, 2007). Strategically positioning the Black newspaper as an advocate of good health follows the principles of effective health public relations and can be viewed as a cultural vehicle to disseminate culturally relevant health information.

This paper proposes that incorporating “conflictual” language, a tactic contingency theory suggests when escalating a conflict furthers worthy goals of an organization, could guide media relations personnel in health public relations to effectively reach and impact behavior among the intended target audience via cultural news outlets such as the African American newspaper.

Because certain issues among African Americans or other racially ethnic minorities may incite change due to the very nature of the issues such as poverty, unequal access to healthcare, mistrust of doctors, and disease morbidity and mortality disparities, it is posited that conflict will not only gain attention of news personnel (by resonating with a predominant news value—conflict) but also resonate with readership among Black newspapers in terms of health prevention.

Given the trust and loyalty of at-risk Black populations to their local newspaper, this study explored the role that health public relations might take in improving knowledge and motivation regarding cancer prevention and treatment. Adopting Cameron’s contingency theory’s definition of public relations as strategic conflict management (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2008; Qju & Cameron, 2008; Wilcox & Cameron, 2006), the occurrence of conflict frames in news about cancer in African American and mainstream newspapers was systematically assessed to determine whether the mainstream or Black newspapers differed with regard to how and to what extent conflict frames appear in health news. Conflict positioning, a strategy in contingency theory, was posited as a means to successfully advocate positive change through news coverage in at-risk communities.

Contingency theory of accommodation: The current study was guided by the contingency theory of accommodation in public relations that posits public relations professionals determine the stance of an organization toward a given public at a given time as a consequence of strategic assessment of a welter of factors identified by contingency researchers (Reber & Cameron, 2003). The strategies may seek to minimize conflict for the organization, or they may be strategies to increase conflict as a lever or pressure point to achieve organizational goals to mobilize readers of Black newspapers in addressing cancer.

Applied to cancer news, contingency theory may suggest the merit of escalating conflict to some degree or taking a purely advocative stance. If reporters can present cancer news information with conflict frames to capture African Americans’ attention, followed by concern or even outrage over disparities, such coverage might thereby mobilize readers to take constructive action in their own lives and in their communities.

The underpinnings of this theory then support the argument that health information disseminated to Black newspapers by media relations personnel may effectively take a conflict-orientation to promulgate a strong, advocative position that garners more coverage of cancer and health disparities. The presence of conflict factors such as health disparities, risk factors and concomitant community mobilization in health news releases disseminated to Black newspapers could arguably lead to more health stories concerning life-threatening diseases and thus greater awareness among African Americans, as well as an increase in the reach and scope of health public relations.

The focus of health public relations is not only to promote mutually beneficial relationships between the promoter (i.e. health organization, promoters, etc.) and the key public or publics but also to act as advocate for society. Rather than an emphasis on the normative role of public relations, health public relations’ central role is to take information gathered by health organizations and health promoters with the purpose of increasing awareness about health issues and also advocate change in health behavior. Thus, the contingency theory of accommodation may serve a critical role in establishing a framework to guide health public relations with advocating good health to cultural groups.

To assess the value of a conflictual approach to tailoring news releases for Black newspapers and whether a tailored, conflict-framed media relations program holds promise to garner more coverage of cancer than a control condition that does not employ the strategy, the following research questions are (advanced):

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