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A pentadic analysis of the “Vax That Thang Up” COVID-19 vaccination campaign

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ABSTRACT

Background: Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination campaigns have proliferated, with an emergence of non-health organizations endeavoring to sway vaccine skeptics. **Aim:** This paper analyzes the rhetorical strategies and audience response of one campaign - "Vax That Thang Up" - by BLK, a dating app for black singles. **Method:** Using a pentadic analysis, I examine how and why "Vax That Thang Up" attempts to persuade its target population - single black people - to get vaccinated, what the ad suggests about how this population makes health decisions, and how these individuals identify (or not) with the campaign's message. **Results/Discussion:** Ultimately, this research sheds light on how contemporary health campaigns targeted toward minority populations can inadvertently reinforce stigmatized narratives, undermine audience agency, and lead to a resistant audience. Health promotion strategies must be sensitive to the historical conditions that have influenced an audience's attitude towards the American healthcare system. **Conclusions:** Health messaging aimed at historically marginalized and underserved populations, which have had to navigate difficult messaging in the past, highlights the importance of providing health information that fosters greater understanding, curiosity, and empowerment among these groups.

KEYWORDS

Critical health communication, health campaigns, rhetoric, vaccination

BIOGRAPHY

Jaime Shamado Robb, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Florida Atlantic University. His research explores inequalities in contemporary society at the intersection of health and rhetoric surrounding marginalized populations. He utilizes qualitative research methods to examine how macro-level social forces, such as health policy and economic inequality, impact the day-to-day health experiences of marginalized populations. He focuses on advancing health communication and rhetorical scholarship that engages critically with the experiences of those individuals living at the margins.

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Introduction

“wtf is going on?”

“This is offensive; is this how you get the black community’s attention?”

“Never forget the Tuskegee experiments”

“Never take health advice from a rapper”

“Modern minstrelsy at its finest”

“Never going to take that shit”

As I scroll through the YouTube comments underneath the “Vax that Thang Up” music video I just watched, I find myself sharing many of the same sentiments. I am the supposed target audience of this health campaign music video. I am a single, black man who has yet to receive the COVID-19 vaccination. I am also a lover of hip-hop and grew up listening to “Back that Thang Up” by Juvenile, the rapper featured in the video. Yet, as I watch the video on repeat, I don’t feel any more motivated to receive the vaccine; I feel similar to others in the comments: confused, disappointed, and like I’m being “talked down to.” I find myself rebelling against the video, even though I ultimately believe in the central call to action, namely, to get vaccinated. Yet as a health communication scholar, scrolling through the comments, I can’t help but notice the disconnect between the video’s intended purpose and the target audience’s reception of the message. In other words, I find myself asking “wtf went wrong here?”

This article examines the “Vax that Thang Up” campaign ad (produced by the “BLK” dating app marketed toward Black individuals), which encourages its users to get a COVID-19 vaccination. By utilizing Kenneth Burke’s dramatisitic pentad—a critical framework used to examine the human motivation underlying symbolic action—this article analyzes the “who, what, where, by what means, why, how, [and] when” of this campaign from multiple rhetorical perspectives (Burke, 1945). Observations from this analysis are also considered within the broader context of health campaigns targeted at minority communities that “simplify” health information to promote “healthy” decision-making.

By and large, health campaigns attempt to influence audiences’ health knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Dutta, 2017). Since the emergence of the COVID-19 virus and subsequent COVID-19 vaccines, health campaigns focused on combating this public health challenge have become widespread. Health organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) frequently publicize scientific information on the benefits of vaccinations, but there is still resistance to getting vaccinated among certain populations (Kumar et al., 2022). This has compelled marketers from various industries to promote this health choice to consumers through targeted ad campaigns. Given that these health campaigns are produced by non-health businesses - whose primary agenda is financial gain - the rhetorical strategies used in these campaigns often oversimplify complex social/medical issues, draw on reductive emotional strategies to persuade audiences into compliance, and ignore the unique cultural perspectives of historically marginalized populations (Williams & Rucker, 2000). The consequences of these rhetorical strategies can spell doom for the health campaign as a whole - leading audiences to ignore or resist the central call to action, as was the case in the “Vax That Thang Up” campaign.

This article examines the logic and consequences of these rhetorical choices within the “Vax that Thang Up” music video. The paper is organized as follows: First, I draw from existing literature in health communication, critical theory, and rhetorical criticism to provide context for two essential themes in this paper - the intersection of public health campaigns and culture, and the intersection of rhetorical criticism and health communication. I then describe my research method, pentadic analysis (Burke, 1945), and why it is an ideal method for answering the central research question of this paper: “What does the ‘Vax that Thang Up’ ad suggest about how black people make health (ex., vaccination) decisions?” I then analyze the “Vax That Thang Up” ad using Burke’s pentad, breaking the analysis into five sections based on the pentad’s components. I end the paper by discussing one of the implications we might glean from the study: public health campaigns targeted toward minority populations are more likely to be successful (i.e., persuade their audience to action) if they are culture-centered.

Literature review

Public health campaigns and cultural messaging

Cancer, Heart disease, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, Bird Flu, Covid-19...Just reading the news nowadays can feel like doom scrolling. Headline after headline about new ways we might get sick and die. Depending on the news source, one might be left feeling hopeless about doing anything to change the situation, or even worse, believe everything is okay and nothing needs to change. Combating these public health risks requires more than a new medical breakthrough or scientific discovery. It also requires convincing the public these health risks do indeed exist, and we should care enough to do something about them. But even changing the public’s beliefs and attitudes about a health risk is not enough. Individuals must be informed of the ways they can take action to address the problem and minimize risk. So how do we change the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of “the public” (ex. United States) given the public’s wide variety of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (i.e. cultures)? These are communication/rhetorical problems that are central to solving health problems.

A public health campaign attempts to address these health risks using thoughtfully designed messages to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of a targeted population, traditionally using marketing strategies with mass-produced, simplified, health-risk prevention messages (Atkin & Rice, 2013; Randolph & Viswanath, 2004). While such practices have garnered success in getting specific populations to change their negative health behaviors, these approaches tend to ignore cultural differences (and their influence on health behaviors), leaving marginalized group members to make different health choices than those proposed through these campaigns (Dutta, 2007; Basu, 2011). Culture is often understood as a non-existent factor when using this one-size-fits-all approach, meaning these campaigns are framed through the lens of dominant group members (Dutta, 2017; Lupton, 1994). For example, undocumented immigrants living in the United States must navigate healthcare practices, such as getting a flu vaccine, in ways that are markedly different from U.S. citizens (Robb, 2022). This population is subjected to the same health campaign messages as citizens, yet due to limited resources (such as a social security number), fears of deportation,

historical distrust, and social stigmas, they lack the means to participate in the same way (Robb, 2022).

Kreps & Sparks (2008) highlight how public health campaigns can help prevent risky attitudes toward health behavior. For campaigns to achieve such impact, Kreps and Sparks (2008) suggest campaign planners examine the cultural backgrounds of their target population when designing campaign messages. When health campaigns attempt to reach marginalized cultural groups, the messages often rely on generic, stereotypical cultural characteristics (Basu, 2010) because these campaigns appeal to the “the cultural characteristics that are considered relevant by the health communicator” rather than the cultural characteristics considered relevant by the targeted audience members (Dutta, 2007, p. 306).

The problem lies in the design of messages, whereby one cultural perspective tends to dominate the rhetorical strategies used to reach diverse audiences (Kreps & Sparks, 2008). The more diverse the target audience, the less effective the message becomes. For example, Viswanath & Ackerson (2011) showed how the same cancer information disseminated by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) was interpreted differently based on race, ethnicity, and class. This led to minority groups seeking preventative care at a lower rate when compared to non-minority groups. NCI discourse relied on a singular understanding of cancer patients that removed any sense of cultural difference, a frequent feature of cancer public health campaigns (Viswanath et al., 2012). Thus, the next section highlights the importance of crafting rhetorical strategies that focus on establishing credibility and trustworthiness.

Rhetorical criticism and health communication

A rhetorical critic describes, interprets, and evaluates how people use symbols to persuade. According to Black (1965), “whether a given discourse actually exerts an influence has no bearing on whether it is rhetorical” (p. 15) as intent can create influence even if it is not the desired influence. Several health scholars have encouraged more rhetorical investigations in health-related spaces (Malkowski et al., 2016; Ihlen et al., 2021) to understand “how specific symbolic patterns structure meaning and action in health and medical contexts and practices” (Scott & Melancon, 2017, p. 37).

Segal (2008) suggests that critical health researchers should adopt a rhetorical frame of mind that can attune scholars to pose culturally relevant questions that empower an audience towards action. For example, Ihlen et al. (2021) discovered public health messages are effective tools for overcoming vaccine skepticism but only if those strategies are implemented with the audience's limitations in mind. They suggest messages aimed towards vaccine skeptics should be tailored to cultural hesitancy drivers, such as ensuring source credibility and cultivating trustworthiness (Ihlen et al., 2021). Bates & Schrader (2023) show how rhetorical strategies such as the use of second-person pronouns (i.e. “talk to your doctor”) in direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical commercials help target audiences identify with the message and seek out further health information from trusted sources. Scott et al. (2013) encourage scholars studying health and rhetoric to go beyond traditional rhetorical methods to explore the complexities of language as social action. Kenneth Burke's (1945)

pentadic method, considered dramatically, is ideal for illuminating the communication practices that define and attribute simplistic cultural motives to a group, such as supplying black audiences with the basic terms of motivation related to getting vaccinated.

Method

Burke's dramatic pentad

Burke (1945) framed social interaction as a “drama” (i.e. “all the world’s a stage”) where humans play roles in cultural situations and are motivated to behave in particular ways, with communication being the primary tool by which this drama plays out but is also the primary tool for understanding the motivations of the actors within the drama. As a research tool in rhetorical criticism, Burke’s pentad (1945) is a five-point system that seeks to identify: where the drama is taking place (scene), who are the actors (agents), what are the actions (act), how do the actors go about the action (agency), and why this drama is unfolding as it does (purpose). In many ways, these elements correspond to the traditional 5 W’s of journalism: who, what, where, when, and why, with an additional category for “how” or “by what means” (corresponding closely with the idea of ‘agency’). For Burke (1945), examining human interaction through the lens of these categories is useful for identifying the ways individuals come to interpret and respond to what is happening in a situation. Burke’s pentad is useful in health communication as it helps identify ways in which health campaign messages use cultural symbols as rhetorical tools to try and change potentially risky health behaviors, and the ways in which recipients of these messages interpret and respond to them. For instance, Hagland (2015) used Burke’s pentad to investigate how a Norwegian health outreach program focused on reducing the number of hospital no-shows functioned with hidden motives, which limited their ability to reach and connect with their target audiences. Similarly, Robb (2022) draws on the pentad to illuminate how the CDC’s post-AIDS health campaign (re)produced HIV/AIDS related stigmas in their attempt to promote pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) as ending the AIDS epidemic.

Burke’s pentad is a valuable tool for answering the central research question of this article: “What does the ‘Vax that Thang Up’ ad suggest about how black people make health (ex. vaccination) decisions?” Analysis of these observations attempts to call attention to these strategies as a dangerous precedent for health campaign rhetoric and instead suggests an approach that is more culture-centered.

Results

Vax That Thang Up

The Google-owned media platform, YouTube, is a popular media outlet for disseminating health messages due to the platform’s low cost of distribution, diverse audience base, and limited regulatory oversight (van Dijck, 2013). BLK used YouTube, streaming services (HULU, etc.), and social media outlets (Instagram, etc.) to promote

the vaccination campaign "Vax that Thang Up" - a 1 minute and 48 seconds music video - first published on YouTube on July 6, 2021. However, the video was briefly removed from the platform and put back up. According to a September 2021 CNN article by Clare Duffy, YouTube had removed 130,000 videos identified as providing vaccine misinformation. It is important to note that the video initially identified itself as a Public Service Announcement (PSA) before it was removed and re-uploaded without that qualifier. The design and implementation of the video was outsourced to Majority (a black-owned ad agency co-founded by Shaquille O'Neil).

According to the campaign's website, it aims to promote a message that "dating is better in all ways once you are vaccinated," by tapping into "a direct line to the audience that needs to internalize this message" (BLK, 2021). The campaign's symbols and design suggest a Black target audience, which features actors with dark skin, as well as the more general fact that BLK is a dating app specifically for black individuals (Blistein, 2021). For instance, accompanying the music video is a text description stating: "Black adults under the age of 40 are the most likely group to avoid the COVID-19 vaccination, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Distrust of doctors and government, less access to vaccination centers, and online misinformation each play a role. We hope this video is both entertaining and actionable" (BLK, 2021).

The purpose of the video is clear - encourage black individuals to receive a COVID-19 vaccination. The motivation for getting vaccinated is also clear - to get black audiences back to dating. Or so it initially seems. As will be discussed later in the analysis, the stated purpose of the video (i.e., getting vaccinated) becomes obscured due to the stereotypical, pandering frame in which the message is placed. The next section focuses on the full-length video for analysis as it offers the full scope of the campaign's message, intent, and suspected audience.

Rhetorical fusion: Vaccination, dating, and entertainment-education

The video begins with a slow fade-in reminiscent of late 90s rap music videos, with the BLK logo fading off-screen to reveal rap artist Juvenile standing behind four women in short shorts dancing on an empty outdoor basketball court. The instrumental background of Juvenile's popular song "Back That Azz Up" provides an implicit message as it begins to play while the camera circles Juvenile's featured artist, Manny Fresh (a well-known hip-hop producer and original creator of the "Back That Azz Up" instrumental), and Mia X (a popular hip-hop artist). When Juvenile starts rapping, common visual motifs associated with hip-hop are displayed on screen: minimally clothed female dancers, men "making it rain" vaccine cards instead of money, flashy cars, etc. The opening of the video mirrors that of Juvenile's original song released in 1999. Juvenile emerges from a cloud of smoke dressed in a white t-shirt, with a gold chain, a du-rag, and grills similar to his presentation from the original performance. As the song reaches the chorus, about 20 seconds in, we see Juvenile tossing white pieces of paper—close-up shows they are vaccination record cards—in a manner similar to how he threw money in the original music video. As the scene develops, women transition from dancing on a basketball court to dancing on a fence behind the featured artist, and eventually at a street party.

While the drama unfolds similarly to Juvenile's original, a second drama emerges, taking the viewer away from this familiar hip-hop music video setting and into an individual's home. About ten seconds into the video, the audience is transported from Juvenile and the girls dancing on the basketball court, into a household bathroom. Two women are taking selfies in front of a mirror, seemingly for their BLK dating profile, as the video then shows the women looking down at their cellphone with an approving smile, the camera zooming in to reveal a BLK dating profile featuring a shirtless man.

The view then returns back to Juvenile and his entourage on the basketball courts, rapping and dancing, before alternating between this traditional hip-hop setting and various scenes of a woman and a man in their respective homes, chatting with one another through the BLK dating app and sending each other selfies (ex. man taking a selfie of himself kissing his muscular bicep; him looking at the woman's swimsuit photo on the app; woman holding her cellphone and dancing while seemingly texting with him; etc.) These two dramas unfold at the same time within the video, and at the 50-second mark, the woman and man from the prior scenes meet up and embrace in person. The rest of the video features clips of women selecting different dating options using the app, while the music video drama unfolds with an outdoor party that mirrors the tropes of Juvenile's original video.

The video concludes with Mia X singing on a residential street, surrounded by low riders dancing up and down. Between shots of Mia X singing, the video quickly cuts back to the dating drama, where three women lie on a bed comparing potential matches. The end of the video shows the BLK logo fading out on the side of a sideways low-rider, followed by the messages #vaxthatthangup and #smashwithscott

This seemingly singular narrative intertwines two distinct rhetorical dramas. On one level, the music video frames an argument in favor of vaccination, yet on another, the dating app subplot dictates the rationale for getting vaccinated in the first place, as articulated by Juvenile and his featured artist. By pointing to the communicative elements that direct this drama, we can note the rhetorical maneuvering of entertainment-education in BLK's vaccination campaign, whereby the education is related to promoting their dating app instead of the civic/public health values related to vaccinating (Frank & Falzone, 2021). The following section analyzes how the scene operates as a trope for inviting audiences into this familiar type of drama.

Substance and scene: Rationalizing vaccination within cultural logic

In "Vax that Thang Up," the scene is two halves of the same coin: the first being African American communities, and the latter being hip-hop as a representative metaphor for this community. The video uses a hip-hop scene to appeal to stereotypical tropes of black experience, incorporating symbolic markers that are "supposed" to align with black experiences. Burke (1945) notes that the critic's interpretation of the drama's scene dictates the relationship to the other points of the pentad and how motivation is interpreted. For instance, the music video's backdrop draws on tropes that are unique to the hip-hop genre. As a result, the campaign message reinforces many of the historical contextual tropes about African Americans. By staging this video similarly to Juvenile's original production, the creators draw on the symbols of the historical context to situate a similar internal textual context for the ad. However, while there are a

plethora of signs that point to this being a hip-hop music video, it is not; as a genre, this is still a type of advertisement. But not just any advertisement. The video is framed as a public health infomercial, which typically assumes a level of scientific credibility greater than, say, a general consumer product ad.

Within the music video, the vaccination message is grounded in the same "substance" (Burke, 1950) as hip-hop messages. In other words, audiences are expected to rationalize their vaccination decisions based on the same material logic that governs communication behaviors within hip-hop culture. The message is expected to be taken at face value, and a peripheral route has been established, whereby hip-hop as a cultural scene allows for information to be accepted without critical inquiry (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The scene does not prepare the audience to receive and critically evaluate the bits of health information that this campaign claims to be promoting. This is reinforced within the campaign narrative, as none of the actors mention any practical health information. Instead, it positions the audience as passive receptors of health messages, whereby a focus on the material benefits of vaccination operates as the reductive rationale for engaging in this behavior change.

Burke (1945) argues that scene-dominant dramas (such as "Vax That Thang Up") have a materialistic rationale, meaning that physical comforts and material desires are valued more than other human relations (Edwards, 1972). From a materialist perspective, people are more willing to bypass logical decision-making in favor of what is being materially offered. Central to the idea of "materialism in the African American community is the assertion that the culture of hip-hop acts as a mechanism through which members of the hip-hop community, especially those who are African American, learn to place an inordinate amount of value on material wealth" (Podoshen et al., 2014, p. 217). The actors in this campaign ad are respected members of the hip-hop community who are performing hip-hop culture, thus directing the acts, actors, and their agency to function correspondingly, creating the ad's materialistic undertone.

Scene as the foundation for action

The scene offers a backdrop for the types of acts that can take place. As a hip-hop scene meant to be symbolically representative of African American communities, this situates the act as getting back to dating, not the social/personal responsibilities associated with getting vaccinated. The act is clear when placed in conjunction with a traditional hip-hop scene that promotes the benefits of taking things at face value. This campaign was produced by a dating app company, and it makes sense for them to promote dating. However, if "getting vaccinated" was the primary motive within this drama, then the acts would not only be focused on discourse about getting vaccinated but also on influencing the themes that are present in this drama. If BLK approached their campaign with the hopes of "being actionable," then the acts would have explicitly connected to vaccination as opposed to dating. Indeed, Juvenile and his featured artist would have been forced to construct lyrics that tackled the complexities involved in getting vaccinated as a means of identifying with an already distrustful

audience. This transformation by the ad makers masks the overall purpose of the message.

The chorus lyrics, along with accompanying visuals, imply that the most important call to action is a return to dating, whereby the vaccine is a vehicle for accomplishing that goal. The chorus states, "Dating in real life, you need to vax that thang up," "Feeling freaky all night, you need to vax that thang up," "Girl, you look good, won't you vax that thang up." The promotion of such an act by BLK is further highlighted by the rhetorical situation they found themselves in as a company. As the pandemic limited opportunities for dating connections, BLK and its parent company, Match, rolled out vaccination badges on their app to ease the anxieties surrounding the uncertainty of meeting a stranger in public during a global pandemic. Indeed, this timing suggests the campaign aimed to assuage its audience by having members enhance their credibility in the eyes of potential matches by displaying their vaccination badges. This type of transformation is what Burke (1945) sees as metonymy, an attempt to transform the drama through a type of linguistic reduction. This means that BLK uses hip-hop as a grounding metaphor that allows for the complex challenges of navigating a public health crisis to be reduced to getting back on the dating scene.

The ad's creators are aware of the historical/social challenges this population faces regarding healthcare, as explained in the video's description. This indicates they intentionally transformed such complexities into a simpler message for the purpose of promoting BLK's new dating app feature. This dramatic turning of language attempts to capitalize on the audience's familiarity with the scene as well as the credibility of the agents delivering the message, to offer a script for how the audience should act. As the message suggests, if one is feeling "freaky all night," they simply need to get vaccinated to have those needs met. This line shows the potential for faulty linkages to be made by the audience, as the need for sexual desire now becomes conflated with a need to vaccinate.

At the one-minute mark of the video, we see the setting of a make-shift outdoor "nightclub" with a line of customers waiting to enter, a bouncer, exotic cars pulling up to let people out, and people inside the "club" dancing. Next to the bouncer is a lady in scrubs with a face shield over a mask, gloves on both hands, and a digital thermometer. Symbolically, she is the second line of defense after the bouncer, ensuring everyone meets the health standard for entry in much the same way a vaccination badge does. Yet, she transforms the drama herself, as she moves from checking temperatures to twerking in the club. This act reinforces the scene as one concerned with hip-hop entertainment, as the medical symbolism fails to materialize into action in the same manner that the hip-hop symbols do. The lady in the scrubs represents health expertise in this context, and her symbols suggest that medical professionals are promoting this message, but her actions make it clear that she is operating from a hip-hop and not a public health perspective.

Acts function in multiple ways in this drama: agents who direct the audience towards certain actions based on their lyrical messages, and a secondary act in which dating is possible through vaccinations. Both levels combine to reinforce the notion that vaccination is the means to the desired end - dating (through the BLK dating app). The tension enveloped in this drama positions black actors as readily expecting this type of rhetoric when receiving health information, suggesting that its target audience (African

Americans) is less concerned with the dangers of a pandemic and more focused on the benefits of material comforts offered via dating.

Agents and their agency within the scene

The agents in this drama are Juvenile, his fellow featured artist, while the lyrics they draw on to communicate their message operates as the agency. Burke (1945) writes that the agents' actions will be limited by the nature of the scene, and in turn, the scope of the scene is judged by the types of actions that agents perform. The music video fails to capitalize on the credibility of these agents within this scene to present a logical argument for getting vaccinated. If the campaign's author had supplemented Juvenile's agency with that of a health official, it would have enhanced the credibility of the message as health information. For instance, black British comedian Sir Lenny Henry starred in a PSA for the National Health Service in England to communicate to black Britons that the COVID-19 vaccine does not contain a live virus, which was a popular misunderstanding among vaccine skeptics in that population. Juvenile had an opportunity to create a similar message for a population historically skeptical of medical experts, offering practical information for how to make vaccination decisions with limited access and resources.

Instead, Juvenile muddles the overall intent of the ad as a public health message. The rapper starts by saying, "You finna online date yea, find a mate yea, Open up BLK yea, okay yea." He makes it clear that this message is focused on "online dating" and "finding a mate." He follows with, "But before you find a date, yeah, you gotta wait, yeah, gotta go vaccinate, yeah, get it straight, yea," and in doing so, he highlights the purpose of this drama.

As an agent, Juvenile's use of the second-person "you" implicates the listener and brings us from the hip-hop scene back into our local African American communities. This connection to the listener is also shown visually through the background shift from Juvenile and his dancers (hip-hop) to a black woman in her house posting pictures on a dating app, followed by a black man on his couch reacting to the pictures. This second scene acts as an invitation for the audience to imagine the benefits of vaccination that Juvenile communicates.

In addition to Juvenile, the lyrics of featured artists Manny Fresh and Mia X further highlight the materialist benefits of vaccination. Manny's lyrics illuminate dating as the true material benefit: "When we get the shot, we gonna be romancing," and "Girl, you can be the queen after quarantine." Much like Juvenile, Fresh's lyrics support vaccination as the means to allow black actors to get back to "romancing," and then uses multiple sexual innuendos to support this frame: "We can meet up at the spot, and we can do the thing," "I love it when you hold my eggplant emoji." This rhetorical approach can be an effective persuasive tactic in a capitalist society (i.e. "sex sells"), but when considered in a public health context, Fresh's lyrics seem intended to trick its audience into compliance (to get their BLK vaccination badge) as opposed to helping them become informed health decision-makers by acknowledging the potential resistance they have towards medical experts for sociocultural and historical reasons.

Conflicting purposes: Public health vs. platform promotion

While it might seem obvious that the purpose of an ad titled “Vax That Thang Up” would be to persuade its audience to get vaccinated, the purpose becomes muddled because the ad’s text description suggests a public health rationale, which conflicts with the reasons given by the rappers and other characters in the video, demonstrating a change of purpose by the ad creators. Burke (1945) argues that the drama’s purpose must be interpreted based on the intersecting relationship between the scene, act, and agent, not simply the purpose the rhetor offers. When we consider BLK’s “Vax that Thang Up” campaign video using Burke’s pentad, we can observe the systematic way the video positions black audiences: as a homogenous group compelled to action based on materialism rather than reason and evidence.

This dramatization is reinforced by each artist’s lyrics and the way they suggest how vaccination will lead to material benefits (dating/sex). Mia X’s final line illuminates the capitalist intent behind this message and its central purpose of brand promotion dressed up as public health messaging: “BLK says go get the shot. Wanna smash with Scott, then BLK says, go get the shot,” this ending lyric transforms this text to reveal its ultimate purpose, which is promoting BLK’s new vaccination badge feature on their app.

Mia exposes “BLK” as the ultimate agent directing other agents (rappers, actors) within this drama, as she tells us what “BLK” tells her to say. Mia’s final verse also implicitly positions “BLK” as the experts to consult when considering whether to get vaccinated. This is one of the more sophisticated rhetorical moves made by the creators of the campaign video, as the brand subtly aligns itself with the experts who recommend vaccination.

Discussion

According to Brummett (2019), the purpose of doing rhetorical criticism is to be able to identify how language can transform perspective, but also to ask who a text empowers/disempowers. This ad disempowers African Americans in the context of making healthcare decisions by not offering their audience an opportunity to critically engage with the medical benefits of getting vaccinated. The ad’s rhetorical choices feed into contemporary fears about health misinformation as it fails to address any perceived fears this community might have about getting vaccinated.

BLK’s campaign not only oversimplifies a health problem, but also oversimplifies African-American culture, stereotyping its audience as a homogenous group incapable of (or uninterested in) understanding logical appeals for changing health behaviors, and instead using reductive emotional tactics in order to “trick” its audience into compliance. The ad seemingly mocks its target audience by promoting a “peripheral route” that suggests this group is motivated by the status of those delivering the message rather than investigating the merits of the message itself (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In short, the ad “talks down” to its audience. This, in turn, reinforces stereotypical ways of communicating to minority groups, further reducing the quality of health messages they have access to.

While the text description for “Vax That Thang Up” suggests that the campaign was designed to increase vaccine adherence and challenge misinformation among black populations regarding COVID-19, this paper argues that this ad does the opposite, due to its reductive messaging that: (1) presents black individuals as lacking the critical awareness needed to make informed vaccination decisions; (2) idealizes the historical conditions that have influenced black populations' mistrust towards mainstream healthcare messaging, and (3) uses stereotypical cultural characteristics as a means of identification among black populations (Miller, 2021). When messages exploit cultural traits to evoke emotional responses while omitting logical and rational arguments, they often generate a more resistant audience rather than a compliant one, as individuals disidentify with the stereotypical portrayals of their cultural beliefs and practices (Vats, 2016). This can be seen within the comments made by YouTube viewers who watched the video, included in the introduction to this paper. This is also evident in the backlash that artists Juvenile and Mannie Fresh received for making this song, in which Fresh claimed he was cyberbullied after the song was released (Eustice, 2023).

Health promotion strategies must be sensitive to the historical conditions that have influenced an audience's attitude towards the American healthcare system. As a company aiming to represent Black/African American communities, BLK should move beyond stereotypical rhetorical practices that contribute to minority populations receiving less accurate health information and losing trust in the healthcare system.

Public health campaigns aimed at historically marginalized and underserved populations, should provide health information that fosters greater understanding, curiosity, and empowerment. At a time when health misinformation is high and public trust in health systems is low (Ferreira Caceres et al., 2022), these campaigns should evaluate when the health messages they create cause more harm than good. This includes evaluating the unintended effects of a campaign. This practice becomes of critical importance when non-health organizations (such as a dating app) disseminate “health” messages, as non-expert health advice tends to create confusion and worsen health decision-making for marginalized populations (Kaňková et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Health campaign workers should be responsible for gauging an individual's agency to act in accordance with their message. The “Vax That Thang” campaign highlights how health strategies aimed at marginalized populations can symbolically disempower the very audiences it seeks to engage. Health rhetoric directed at historically marginalized and underserved populations that have had to navigate fraught messaging in the past illuminates the importance of offering health information that leads to greater understanding, curiosity, and agency among these audiences. Such a top-down approach (re)produces dangerous narratives about black individual's health decision making and further undermines this group's trust in public health messaging.

Ultimately, health promoters should aim to be culture-centered in their approach (CCA). Meaning, messages should be centered in cultural context and understanding, while promoting agency at the community level. The culture-centered approach examines how cultural identities at the margins of a health industry navigate the

uneven distribution of resources, such as information. By using the CCA as a tool to engage with marginalized populations, health promoters are encouraged to move beyond stereotypical characteristics of culture and instead focus on developing messages that are credible and trustworthy. According to Dutta (2007), research that adheres to the CCA typically begins by crafting open-ended questions, guided by the collaborative partnership between institutions and community organizations. The focus of the culture-centered scholar/promoter is on collaboratively establishing frameworks of credibility that acknowledges the ability of marginalized communities to enact agency.

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