

Technical Assistance Bulletin

Culturally Competent Approaches to Media Literacy

Media literacy is a viable communication strategy that can be a key part of a youth substance abuse prevention program by providing essential life skills to critically interpret and influence media. Like any strategy, its use with diverse populations requires careful deliberation and adaptation — a culturally competent approach. Media literacy becomes culturally competent when adaptations are tailored for specific cultural groups — to the way in which they utilize media and the ways that media depict and target them. Such tailoring ensures that the activities and benefits of media literacy, such as resistance to pro-use messages, are relevant and accessible to youth of all cultures. Media literacy empowers youth and communities to make healthier decisions and create healthier media environments.

Media Literacy

In 1992, the Center for Media and Values at the National Conference on Media Literacy agreed to define media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms.” Essentially, it is the expansion of “literacy” to include all media forms, including new technology.

In classroom or community settings, media literacy programs typically contain one or more of the following activities:

- Utilizing a variety of media — such as video, magazines, music, and websites — to engage youth with familiar channels and formats
- Building awareness in youth of their current media practices, including time of use, type of exposure, and information/entertainment obtained
- Deconstructing media texts and messages, that is, critically examining the parts of a message — its meanings, intent, context, and impact
- Analyzing the impact of media on institutions, for example, the role of television in shaping public perceptions of the Gulf War
- Analyzing the impact of media on individuals, communities, and cultural practices, such as the consumption of alcohol related to spectator sporting events
- Understanding media as business organizations whose key goal is to make profits by attracting audiences and selling access to those audiences to advertisers
- Producing messages, that is, learning to use media tools and technology to construct messages, particularly those that are pro-health and pro-social.

Media Literacy Can...

Media literacy can help to protect youth from pressures — from advertising and other media constructions — to smoke, drink, use drugs, have sex, or eat unhealthy foods. In 1996, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development posited that media literate youth may have obtained knowledge that helps “counter the development of social or peer norms that reinforce and maintain unhealthy behavior.” Media literacy helps youth to navigate myriad environmental risks and make healthier decisions.

Media literacy can contribute to prevention in many distinct ways. It can:

- Counter messages that glamorize alcohol, drugs, and tobacco
- Influence youths’ perceptions of risk and either social approval or disapproval
- Encourage youth to consider multiple interpretations of media messages
- Build refusal skills to counter inappropriate influences
- Build critical communication skills
- Improve media use habits, such as changing ritualistic viewing behaviors
- Create a healthier media environment in which emphasis is placed on pro-health rather than pro-consumption messages.

Cultural Competence

What is cultural competence? Cultural competence refers to a set of academic and interpersonal skills that allow individuals to increase their understanding and appreciation of cultural differences and similarities within, among, and between groups. This requires a willingness and ability to draw on community-based values and traditions, to consider

Basic Cultural Competence Adaptations

Before undertaking cultural adaptations specific to media literacy, consider these basic adaptations:

- Tailor language to the participants, including the appropriate dialect, idioms, and colloquialisms.
- Tailor the delivery to the learning styles of the participants, including the use of different media, interactive activities, simulations, and role-plays.
- Choose a credible instructor, often a member of the cultural group.

(Office for Substance Abuse Prevention, 1992)

unique contexts and experiences, and to work with knowledgeable persons of and from the community in developing targeted interventions, communications, and other supports.

Culture is influenced by many factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, age, region, and level of acculturation. Thus, cultural competence is a complex, comprehensive, and ongoing process. It often requires keen recruitment, selection, and training of culturally appropriate staff.

Culturally competent programs demonstrate sensitivity to and understanding of cultural differences in program design, implementation, and evaluation. Done effectively, these programs maintain attention to and achievement of their prevention goals while making appropriate adaptations to maximize the involvement and engagement of specific populations.

Key Issues for Culturally Competent Approaches

Culturally competent approaches to media literacy are motivated by a variety of factors: media portrayals of specific groups, advertising targeting specific groups, perspectives on media based on cultural practices, and perspectives on media based on treatment by media.

- Media often provide distorted, imbalanced portrayals of particular groups. Some groups, such as the elderly, are often stereotyped, while other groups such as Asian Americans and gays and lesbians, are omitted from news, entertainment, and advertising depictions. Still other groups such as African Americans, are often vilified. Media also distort the public's perception of drug use in particular communities. For example, media reports tend to underreport the use of drugs in affluent and White communities. Media literacy must recognize and incorporate these differences.
- To maximize sales, many advertisers escalate and tailor marketing toward selected audience segments, such as communities of color, women, poor, and youth. Media literacy must include and analyze these practices.
- Advertisers coopt cultural celebrations and traditions such as Cinco de Mayo or Kwanza to sell products. This commercial use of culture impacts use behaviors, cultural practices, and needs integration in media literacy programming.
- Groups have culture-specific attitudes, values, and practices related to media. For example, some populations are skeptical of information received via television unless filtered and made credible by a local community leader. Media literacy must be tailored to how they currently use media.
- Some groups are already media literate, that is, they exercise critical skills to interpret the media that stereotype them and target them for unhealthy behaviors. For example, many young Latinos question the media's distorted depictions of them as gang members, illegal immigrants, and drug dealers. Media literacy must refine and build upon these skills; it must provide an added value.

Issues	Adaptations/Steps	Outcomes
Media distortions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Be inclusive in design and delivery 2. Show and analyze current media portrayals 	<p>Enhanced attention and learning</p> <p>Enhanced engagement; improved self-identity, decoding, and resistance skills</p>
Targeted marketing, cultural co-optation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Show and analyze current marketing practices 	<p>Positive self-identity, resistance to pro-use messages</p>
Cultural use of media, pre-existing media literacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Understand the use of media within specific groups 	<p>Validates cultural media use patterns</p>

Key Adaptations and Potential Outcomes

Adaptations with attention to culture can ensure that diverse youth are respected and engaged. These adaptations are both simple and complex. They require a deep understanding of culture and commitment of resources. It is useful to view these adaptations as incremental steps to improve the cultural competence of our media literacy strategy.

1. Be inclusive

Include positive entertainment, news, and/or advertising portrayals of participant groups in the design and delivery of media literacy. For example, use positive media depictions of Native Americans when Native American youth are present as participants. Youth identify with characters like themselves. Although these positive depictions may not represent the dominant media frame (and will be more difficult to find), the inclusion can generate participant attention and enhance learning retention.

2. Show and analyze current media portrayals

In addition to positive media portrayals, show and analyze comprehensive actual media portrayals of participant groups, including media stereotyping and misrepresentation of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use. This adaptation includes multiple steps: present current portrayals; analyze inclusions and omissions; analyze dominant frames and the historical, social, political, and economic contexts that drive them; and provide skills and outlets for the creation of balanced, positive portrayals. For example, present the media stereotype of African American males as heavy drug users, analyze the context for this distorted portrayal, and develop ideas and media outlets for positive images. This adaptation can enhance engagement of specific groups, promote positive self-identity, and deepen critical message decoding and resistance skills.

Hands Across Cultures, Española, New Mexico

In Española, New Mexico, a community-based agency delivered a media literacy intervention to a rural, primarily Hispano*, American Indian, and Chicano youth group. Their culturally competent approach included adaptations ranging from simple (selecting appropriate trainers) to complex (investigating the media's dual stereotyping of American Indians as both "noble" and "savage"). These adaptations were successful in maintaining attention because the youth felt they were represented in the materials. Their critical decoding skills were enhanced because the course content focused on analyzing social and historical contexts of current media depictions of their racial groups. The adaptations required a few full days of labor, including time to develop strategy and to implement changes, such as gathering materials and rewriting course content.

* Hispano refers to people who consider themselves descendants of the original Spanish conquistadors who settled in the Espanola area.

Asian Pacific Health Care Venture (APHCV) Asians and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health (APIRH) Guam Communications Network (GCN)

In the Los Angeles area, three agencies utilize media literacy to promote healthy choices for Asian and Pacific Islander American youth. Though each program has distinct objectives, they all exemplify culturally competent approaches to media literacy. All utilize instructors from the community with appropriate language skills.

The content of their media literacy curricula address the role that media play in their communities, the general absence of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans from media and advertising targeted toward them. Yet each program addresses issues specific to their communities. For example:

- Youth in the GCN consider the role of tobacco advertising in the Pacific Islands and how it influences them and their families in America.
- Teen girls in APIRH watch media clips of stereotypes of Asian women and discuss the impact on their self-image.
- Youth in APHCV analyze how the absence of their media images contributes to a lack of community ownership of problems and solutions.

These programs utilize media literacy as a means to address deeper community issues, such as racism, sexism, self-esteem, social responsibility, and access to social services. As well, each program motivates youth to change their media environment by developing their own images and messages.

3. Show and analyze current marketing practices

Present and analyze advertising that targets specific cultural groups, and focus on the co-optation of cultural symbols and traditions. Steps include presentation of multimedia examples of targeted advertising such as the prolific use of billboards in communities of color and use of ethnic media, explaining the practice of target marketing, analysis of advertisers' selection of audience segments, analysis of use of cultural symbols, and analysis of the impact on specific audiences and on cultural practices. For example, present alcohol advertising that depicts Cinco de Mayo, explain how and why alcohol advertisers select Latino markets, and analyze how this advertising impacts the audience's attitudes about alcohol,

the holiday, and their culture. This adaptation can also promote positive self-identity and help youth to protect themselves and their culture from insidious and inappropriate pro-use messages.

4. Understand the use of media within specific groups

Participation in and academic study of groups will help you to understand their use of media. The use of media within and between specific groups is complex and diverse, and influences the shape of media literacy interventions. Within each cultural community, media play different roles, are assigned different values, and travel different routes relative to other sources of information and entertainment. Cultural values provide filters

for what is perceived as “truth,” and cultural practices determine how media information travels and how it is integrated with other community and interpersonal communication channels. In some communities, for example, information conveyed through mainstream media is only deemed credible if sponsored by or relayed through a respected community member. Understand these nuances and develop media literacy interventions that are relevant and build upon cultural strengths. For example, because some immigrant communities rely heavily on informal publications (such as self-produced newsletters) and media from their country of origin, media

Media advocacy:

Strategically using the mass media, often in conjunction with community organizing, to change social or public policies.

Media activism:

Working to change media policies and practices in order to improve the accuracy and fairness of reporting and to increase access to media outlets by the communities that they cover.

Media literacy:

The ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms.

literacy should include an analysis of these informal publications and media from their country of origin, as well as the international marketing techniques of tobacco and alcohol sellers.

Additional Challenges

As media literacy is tailored to and utilized in diverse communities, additional challenges surface. These questions map areas for further exploration and research:

- Does media literacy adequately prepare youth to engage in media advocacy and activism? Are advocacy and activism skills integral to media literacy? (See box for definitions.)
- Is media literacy of limited value in communities with limited resources? In other words, does media literacy have a role in communities with limited ability to influence media portrayals or to produce their own media? What of communities with very limited media access such as Pacific Islanders?
- Does media literacy generate power or increase frustration? Particularly for marginalized and targeted groups, does the presentation and decoding of distortions create feelings of anger and frustration, or do they provide concrete avenues to influence powerful media entities?

References/Resources

There are a number of organizations that specialize in the development of media literacy curricula.

California Newsreel
149 Ninth Street #420
San Francisco, CA 94103

(415) 621-6196
<www.newsreel.org>

Provides critical videos on the press, television, and advertising, with a focus on portrayals of race.

Center for Media Literacy
4727 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 403
Los Angeles, CA 90010

(800) 226-9494
<www.medialit.org>

Provides a wide array of media literacy curricula, publications, and videos addressing diverse health and social issues.

CSAP Communications Team
7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 500
Bethesda, MD 20814
(301) 941-8500

Provides training and technical assistance on media literacy and cultural competence and other communication strategies. See additional Technical Assistance Bulletins at <www.health.org>

Media Literacy Online Project
University of Oregon
College of Education
Eugene, OR

<<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/HomePage>>

Provides publications, research literature, tips, and updates on media literacy.

New Mexico Media Literacy Project
6400 Wyoming Avenue NE
Albuquerque, NM 87109

(505) 828-3159

Provides CD-ROM, videos, and newsletters on basic media literacy concepts and programs.

Information on prevalence of alcohol and drug themes in specific forms of media.

Roberts, Donald, F. and Peter G. Christensen. *'Here's Looking at You, Kid': Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco in Entertainment Media*. Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation; New York: The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2000.

Roberts, Donald F., Lisa Henriksen, and Peter G. Christensen. *Substance Abuse in Popular Movies and Music*. Washington, DC: Office of National Drug Control Policy; Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; Studio City, CA: Mediascope, 1999.

Strasburger, Victor, C. and Ed Donnerstein. "Children, Adolescents, and the Media in the 21st Century." *Adolescent Medicine: State of the Art Reviews* 11.1 (2000) : 1-18.

For help in developing culturally competent approaches to media literacy, or in integrating culturally appropriate content:

CSAP Communications Team
7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 500
Bethesda, MD 20814

(301) 941-8500.
cct@urc-chs.com

Several community-based groups have tailored traditional media literacy programs. We would like to compile a database for networking with anyone wishing to share their process/approach. Please contact CCT.



*Please feel free to be a “copy cat” and
make all the copies you want.*

You have our permission!

This bulletin is one in a series developed through CSAP’s communication team. It is designed to assist programs working to prevent and reduce alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use and abuse. We welcome your suggestions regarding information that may be included in future bulletins. For help in learning about your audience, developing messages and materials, and evaluating communication programs, contact CSAP’s communication team at 301-941-8500.

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