

## Entertainment-Education for Starting HIV/AIDS Discussions and Reducing Stigma: African American College Students' Reactions to the Film *Yesterday*

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### ABSTRACT

Entertainment-education is a media tool used to reduce the spread and stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. This pilot study explored how African American (AA) college students understood stigma as portrayed in the South African film *Yesterday*. Data were collected through a focus group where four major themes emerged. One is "we can talk, but please do not touch." The study shows that films on HIV/AIDS that feature people of African descent can be used to generate classroom discussions and promote positive attitudes about HIV/AIDS among AA students.

**Keywords:** HIV/AIDS ■ entertainment-education ■ African American ■ students ■ South Africa

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## **INTRODUCTION**

HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects people of African descent on a global scale. In 2008, over 22 million HIV-positive people lived in sub-Saharan Africa (AVERT, 2010a; UNAIDS, 2009). During 2007, an estimated 5.7 million South Africans were living with HIV/AIDS. In Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Zambia, more than 15 percent of the adult population aged 15-49 are HIV/AIDS positive (AVERT, 2010b). Moreover, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2007), African Americans (AA) accounted for almost half of all HIV cases in the United States. They are disproportionately affected due to socioeconomic factors, STD rates, and stigma and have lower survival rates (CDC, 2009).

For over 25 years, health educators and communicators have used various means to increase awareness and knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Media campaigns have informed people about modes of transmission, so they can better protect themselves from contracting HIV. One communication strategy is entertainment-education (E-E), which puts health information into storylines for radio, television, film, and other media (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; 2002). Because developing HIV/AIDS awareness in AA communities is urgently needed, the current study explored how the film *Yesterday* (2004), which shows the hardships faced by an AIDS-positive woman named *Yesterday* in rural South Africa, can be used to generate discussions among AA college students on HIV/AIDS and the stigma associated with the disease. The pilot study aimed to understand, first, how AA college students view stigma as shown in the film and, second, how they relate to the film as a teaching strategy in a classroom setting.

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Health communication scholars and practitioners use films and other media to initiate discourse on HIV/AIDS within various communities, especially among AAs, for whom stigma is still a problem. According to Herek and Capitano (1999), both whites and blacks show negative feelings toward people who have contracted AIDS and were gay and/or bisexual. Furthermore, blacks were more sympathetic toward people who contracted the disease through blood transfusions compared to those infected through needle sharing or multiple sexual partners. The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS has been so profound that it plays a role in sexual orientation disclosure in the AA community. Studies show that black men who have sex with men (MSM) and bisexual men are less likely to tell people their sexual preference (Kennamer, Honnold, Bradford, & Hendricks, 2000; Millett, Malebranche, Mason, & Spikes, 2005).

## **ENTERTAINMENT-EDUCATION**

For more than thirty years, health campaign planners and health educators have strategically placed messages in different types of media to promote, educate, or increase awareness about a social or health topic. This strategy is commonly referred to as *entertainment-education* (E-E), *infotainment*, or *edutainment* (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). *Entertainment-education* is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate in order to increase audience knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change over behavior" (Singhal & Rogers, 1999:xii). For centuries, people have infused important messages in song, dance, theater, and other platforms, but within the last fifty years, campaign planners have made a conscious effort to incorporate social messages in

the people have infused important messages in song, dance, theater, and other platforms, but within the last fifty years, campaign planners have made a conscious effort to incorporate social messages in the media to change viewers' minds (Singhal, Usdin, Scheepers, Goldstein, & Japhet, 2004). Messages designed for E-E can be part of a large national campaign or smaller scale efforts to reach a particular audience (Singhal & Rogers, 2002). Entertainment-education allows academicians, writers, producers, and practitioners to present information that may not be discussed in everyday conversations. Montgomery (1989) discusses one of the most controversial instances of E-E during the early 1970s. On the television series *Maude*, the main character debated having an abortion. The storyline caught viewers' attention, and some were not happy about a comedy genre addressing a sensitive question. Other television shows, such as *Good Times*, *Archie Bunker*, and *Murphy Brown*, also discussed important social concerns.

A recent body of literature supports the belief that E-E can be used to increase knowledge and change attitudes and behaviors associated with HIV/AIDS. Farr, Witte, Jarato, and Menard (2005) found that people who remembered storylines from the Ethiopian radio program *Journey of Life* reported a desire to modify their health behaviors. In a study by Vaughan, Regis, and St. Catherine (2000), listeners reported learning more about HIV/AIDS from a radio program in St. Lucia and had more positive views regarding family planning. A host of other studies have shown that radio can be effective in educating, creating awareness, and reducing stigma associated with HIV/AIDS (Pappas-DeLuca et al., 2008; Vaughan, Rogers, Singhal, & Swalehe, 2000); television can also play a role in education on sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS (O'Leary, Kennedy, Pappas-DeLuca, Nkete, Beck, & Galavotti, 2007; Whittier, Kennedy, St. Lawrence, Seeley, & Beck, 2005).

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Literature also suggests that film producers and directors can use the big screen to inform the public on health issues. Singhal and Vasanti (2005) explored responses to the Indian film, *Phir Milenge*. Over 60 percent of participants learned about the disease and thought the movie industry in India should do more to generate discussions on HIV/AIDS. US films portraying the struggles of individuals living with HIV/AIDS include *Rent* (2005), *Boys on the Side* (1995), and *Philadelphia* (1992), but we did not find many peer-reviewed articles discussing them.

#### **YESTERDAY**

In 2004, James Darrell Roodt directed the HBO film *Yesterday*, presented in the isiZulu language, and supported by the Nelson Mandela Foundation (Nelson Mandela Foundation, n.d.). It shows the struggles of Yesterday, a devoted wife and mother who has been diagnosed with AIDS, contracted from her husband, a mine worker in Johannesburg. She must inform him that she has the illness and cope with stigma, domestic violence, meager financial resources, lack of transportation to the medical facility, single parenthood once her husband dies, and worries about who will take care of their daughter Beauty once she also dies.

The film's goals include raising awareness about the effects of HIV/AIDS, encouraging people to discuss the disease, and reducing stigma (*Yesterday*, n.d.). Previous studies of the film focused on a woman's hardships while coping with AIDS in rural South Africa (Hodes, 2008) and the connection between water problems and HIV/AIDS (Lewis, 2009). This study explores how AA college students respond to the stigma shown in the film; specifically:

**RQ1:** How do they perceive stigma in *Yesterday* through the main characters, Yesterday and John?

**RQ2:** How do they perceive *Yesterday* as a tool for discussing HIV/AIDS in the classroom?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants and Data Collection

This study recruited Historically Black University students enrolled in a course designed to teach them how E-E has been used in television sitcoms and other communication channels to educate audiences about political, social, and health topics. The researcher/focus group facilitator was not the course instructor, and students were not given incentives to participate in the study. However, because they were enrolled in the course, they were eager to learn more about E-E and open to watching the film. Twelve signed the consent forms and agreed to participate. However, only nine (75 percent response rate) actually engaged in the discussions, and one missed the first day of the class discussion. Thus, the analysis only considered nine AA undergraduate students (n=4 men [44 percent] and n=5 women [56 percent]), which is the normal size of a focus group. Patton (1987) suggests an average size of six to eight; Edmunds (1999) proposes that size depends on type, ranging from as few as five to as many as ten people.

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One researcher facilitated the focus group. Before watching the film, students were asked a series of questions, such as: 1) How does an individual contract HIV/AIDS?; and 2) How can an individual protect him/herself from contracting HIV/AIDS? The researcher wanted to discuss HIV/AIDS prior to the film to gauge students' knowledge and attitudes. The first focus group took approximately 45 minutes. After answering the first set of questions, the students started viewing the film. Due to time constraints, they finished viewing the film the next day. Then they were asked another set of questions that sought to establish their thoughts about stigma as portrayed in the film and how they viewed the main character.

Collecting the data in a group setting allowed students to listen to each other's comments and react to each other on a sensitive topic. According to Lindlof and Taylor, during a focus group "the members are stimulated by the ideas and experiences expressed by each other. What occurs is a kind of 'chaining' or 'cascading' effect—talk links to, or tumbles out of, the topics and expressions preceding it" (2002:182). The researcher conducting the sessions was able not only to hear but to see their interactions and reactions to each other's comments (Berg, 2001). While the researcher asked the participants predetermined questions, they questioned each other spontaneously. The researcher, as the moderator, tried to keep the discussions on the predetermined questions and did not express any opinions on the topic.

### Data Analysis

Once the focus group sessions were finished, the researchers transcribed the tapes. They agreed not to use any of the participants' names but to reference them as male (respondents 1-4) or female (respondents 1-5). After transcription, the data were analyzed and arranged according to the list of questions. The researcher who conducted the focus group acted as the moderator/facilitator to discuss the data with one of the other researchers to help ensure objectivity in developing the four major themes. They did not deem the use of qualitative software necessary.

### RESULTS

#### We can talk, but please do not touch

The results indicate that the participants are aware of the main HIV/AIDS transmission modes. When asked how an individual contracts HIV/AIDS, they mentioned unprotected sex, intravenous drug use, and mother-to-child transmission. However, they also clearly communicated stigma or less favorable attitudes toward people who are HIV/AIDS-positive. A question generated through the discussion was, "Would you share a room with someone who is HIV/AIDS-positive?" A few participants were open to the idea, while others simply did not think they would be able to.

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Female respondent 1: "You don't know what someone does when you are not around. You don't want anybody touching your stuff or going through your stuff – so there is no telling what they may be doing to your objects, your items, and it not to say you can or cannot catch it. It is just the fact of knowing. I would not want to put myself through that – having to get tested and share certain things with someone who has a disease like that. I am sorry, that is just me personally."

Male respondent 3: "I think a lot of people said they would, but you really don't know until you are put into that situation."

While some participants would not be open to staying in a room with an HIV/AIDS-positive person, some comments were positive. One female participant commented that the roommate would motivate her to know her status.

Female respondent 5: "I feel like I would share a room with a person who has HIV or AIDS because it's not like you are going to get it from sharing a remote. ...We are not going to cut each other open and share each other's blood, so it would not bother me just to be in the room with somebody. I would actually talk to them and go with them to get tested."

Female respondent 3: "I would rather stay with someone who has HIV than convicted of first-degree murder."

The students agreed that the disease should be discussed more among peers and family members and commented that some people are not very knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS, which creates more fear.

### **Compassion for Yesterday**

After viewing the film, the researchers' questions focused on participants' reactions to the storylines. Most clearly found the film interesting, and it did spark discussions on stigma, especially regarding the main character. The participants perceived Yesterday as a victim – a person who did not deserve her health situation. They showed sympathy for the AIDS-positive character.

Male respondent 3: "She had no control over what was going on. She didn't even know. She was a loving woman, who loved her husband, who loved her daughter – married a man who messed around on her, went off to work, came back to see her, and while he was out messing around, contracted the virus. And she had no idea."

Female respondent 2: "I view her as a strong woman as far as knowing that you have the disease. I feel how she handled the situation from people talking about her."

In the film, Yesterday is always pleasant and has a positive attitude. Even when she learns that she is AIDS-positive, she worries about her daughter and husband. Participants appeared to find her a noble character.

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Female respondent 4: "...the fact is it was not her fault. And when you use drugs you take a risk or share a needle not only can you get HIV, but you can get hepatitis as well. So, when you use a needle, you already know that risk. ...Her being a loving wife who says that it is a risk just getting married to your husband – that is a risk that you would have to take."

The compassion and sympathy participants felt for Yesterday could be because of her virtuous characteristics. They felt it was not her fault that she contracted AIDS. Moreover, it is not uncommon for people to show more sympathy for those who contract HIV/AIDS through blood transfusions and monogamous relationships. People still believe that individuals who contract the disease through multiple sexual partners and illegal drug use deserve less sympathy (Herek & Capitano, 1999; Herek, Capitano, & Widaman, 2002). According to AVERT (2010a), in Western countries, such as the United States, the main modes of HIV/AIDS transmission are associated with MSM, illegal injection drug use, and multiple sexual partners, which are sometimes stigmatized behaviors.

### **Dichotomy of thoughts on the husband**

In one scene, which participants found the most vivid and intense in the movie, Yesterday goes to her husband John's workplace and informs him that she is AIDS-positive and that he has to be tested. John begins to beat her.

Male respondent 2: "The most powerful scene to me was when she travelled to Johannesburg and told him that she had HIV, and his reaction had to be the most realistic

part. I think I might have reacted the same way and set off on her...And hit her.”

Female respondent 2: “I don’t think the beating would take place like it did in the movie, but I do think the spouse could be really mad, causing him to probably strike. But I don’t think the beating would go that far.”

These comments are in line with the thinking that women can be subjected to violence when disclosing their HIV/AIDS-positive status. Domestic violence can be a problem once a woman discloses to her male partner that she is HIV/AIDS-positive (Rothenberg & Paskey, 1995). Some participants did not agree with the husband’s violent display and felt the husband was responsible for infecting his wife with the disease.

Male respondent 3: “I actually didn’t feel sorry for him, because he knew what he was doing. He was messing around, and when she came and told him, he beat her, and the second he went to the doctor, that’s when he started feeling bad.”

Female respondent 2: “I don’t feel bad for him at all because if I was her, I wouldn’t have helped him at all.”

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#### **A good HIV/AIDS talking point but not for teaching**

The film generated a robust discussion among the participants, which is one of the main reasons for E-E, and many agreed that they would watch the film as a source of entertainment. However, they disagreed about whether the film taught them anything new about the disease.

Female respondent 4: “I think it is about age group. What age group do you want to target? Teenagers – because some attitudes of teenagers are that it is not over here, that’s in Africa, and how far is Africa from here? So why should I have to worry about it? And I don’t care about that... But more college students or adults are going to take heed to that, but if you are going to teach someone who is younger than we are, then most likely it is not going to work. You have to show them something that is an American film.”

Female respondent 1: “I think the movie should be more realistic because people are not going to look like that with all the sores on them. You could tell that he was sick and something was wrong with him, but not everyone is like that.”

However, some students agreed the film was somewhat realistic about stigma, especially the scenes where people in the community talked about the husband and avoided physical contact with Yesterday and John.

Male respondent 1: “I feel that they are realistic because I am not saying that I would act like that because you have to be mature. Of course, it is not an airborne disease....You can’t act like that. You can’t judge a person, but that is still not saying that you can’t have certain feelings. You are your own person; you can’t show it. You have to be the bigger person and more mature about the situation.”

Some participants felt watching a film like *Yesterday* offered a good starting point for discussing sensitive issues, such as HIV/AIDS. A few discussed how showing the film can help students ask questions about HIV/AIDS in an educational setting and a controlled environment.

Female respondent 5: "Why not talk about it? Why not talk about what I saw? And how can I apply it to my daily life? Okay, I see what is going on – let's talk about it – let's see how we can do this and not let this happen to us or help fix the problem, so I would talk about it."

### CONCLUSION

This study's aim was to explore how the film *Yesterday* can be used as an E-E tool to generate classroom discussions on HIV/AIDS among AA college students. Furthermore, the researchers explored how the participants understood and viewed the stigma portrayed in the film. The data from the focus group generated four major themes: 1) we can talk, but please do not touch; 2) compassion for *Yesterday*; 3) dichotomy of thoughts about the husband; and 4) the film as a good HIV/AIDS talking point but not for teaching.

The findings, especially the theme *we can talk, but please do not touch*, show that the participants want to be open and understanding of people who are HIV/AIDS-positive. However, various statements made clear that many still have concerns regarding touching or being roommates with someone who has the disease. Furthermore, even though participants understood HIV/AIDS transmission modes, many had concerns regarding normal, everyday interactions with a person who is HIV/AIDS-positive. Studies demonstrate that people are still hesitant to touch objects that an HIV/AIDS-positive person has touched (Herek, Capitano, & Widaman, 2002; Tavooosi, Zaferani, Enzevaei, Tajik, & Ahmadinezhad, 2004). However, the current study found that after watching the film, students indicated a strong sense of compassion and sympathy for the AIDS-positive character *Yesterday*, possibly because many perceived her as an innocent person who did not engage in any behavior that should have put her at risk for the disease, because they had the opportunity to watch and listen to her story. Herek and Capitano (1997) found that African Americans who knew or had contact with someone who has HIV/AIDS were less likely to have negative attitudes toward people with the disease. The students' positive attitude toward the female character could indicate that showing more films on HIV/AIDS in the classroom and bringing in guest speakers who are HIV/AIDS-positive could help students understand more about the disease and reduce HIV/AIDS-stigma.

The film sparked a discussion on HIV/AIDS. More than half of the students reported that they would watch the film with family and friends. This finding is interesting because even though it was shown with English subtitles, the film was able to connect with participants. Although it did not teach them more about HIV/AIDS transmission modes, it did start discourse in an environment where they could ponder their own attitudes toward the disease and people who are HIV/AIDS-positive. Using films to teach about HIV/AIDS can allow



students to ask questions and speak about the topic in a controlled environment that may be less intense for them. Guttman, Wilson, and Pierson (1995) suggest that incorporating HIV/AIDS discussions in communication courses is critical.

African American college students in other disciplines, especially the health sciences, may also benefit from watching films like *Yesterday*. Entertainment-education aims to develop awareness regarding various subjects. Instructors of health communication, nursing, public health, and other health areas can use films that raise awareness about HIV/AIDS to discuss behaviors that are stigmatized in the AA community, such as MSM. Showing films on HIV/AIDS gives students the opportunity to examine their own feelings about the health issue. Furthermore, studies have suggested that E-E programs not only help to educate but show advised/suggested healthy behaviors (Farr et al., 2005; Pappas-DeLuca, 2008). One of the main tenets of E-E is based on Bandura's social learning/modeling (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; 2002), which suggests that individuals will imitate observed behaviors (Bandura, 1997).

The findings of this exploratory study could inform future studies to understand whether to use culturally sensitive communication channels when educating college students about HIV/AIDS. This study was limited by the small sample, so the results cannot be generalized to all AA college students, and conducting only one focus group on one film, which could raise questions about validity. Most of the other films about HIV/AIDS are in English and present a Western point of view. The researchers wanted to explore student reactions to a film about HIV/AIDS in a non-American setting since those who will work in the healthcare industry, especially nursing, will have to understand and communicate effectively with people of different cultures. In any cases, these findings propose significant hypotheses that should be investigated in larger future studies, perhaps testing a quantitative approach to measuring AA college students' knowledge and attitudes regarding stigma before and after watching the film *Yesterday*.

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