

An African-American Weblog Community's Reading of AIDS in Black America

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Introduction

In the mid 1990s, researchers and public policy officials observed a chasm between individuals who had access to computers and the Internet, and those who did not. This gap was termed the "digital divide". Over the last decade, the digital divide has become an increasingly elastic concept that includes disparities in access to computing infrastructure (NTIA 1995) as well as differences in digital skills (Hargittai 2002) and information literacy (Warschauer 2002). Key socio-demographic variables like income, ethnicity and education are viewed as having a differential impact on Internet use.

These early formulations of the digital divide have typically been used to explain slower Internet uptake by African Americans. However, according to Brock (2006), these perspectives are limited because they fail to consider the paucity of Internet content relevant to Black interests. Growth in web authoring tools enables African Americans to actively author their own content and form their own communities for interaction online. Research that examines the ways in which African Americans use the Internet for social support, information sharing, and communication that reflects their worldview becomes increasingly important (Kvasny 2005).

In this study, we examine how ethnic identity is performed discursively in an African American community blog¹. Research on Black blogs and bloggers is noticeably absent from the published literature, with the exception of Poole's (2005) study of African American political bloggers and Brock's (2007) study of African American bloggers' response to mainstream media reports on Hurricane Katrina. Analysis focuses on community members' discussion in response to a 2006 ABC² News special report "Out of Control: AIDS in Black America". AIDS serves as a particularly salient domain of concern, because African Americans are disproportionately affected. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC 2006) reports that even though Blacks account for about 13% of the US population, they account for about half (49%) of the people who get HIV and AIDS. Among men, 41% of men living with HIV/AIDS were Black. Among women, 64% of women living

¹ We anonymize the blog such that participants cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the participants.

² ABC is the American Broadcasting Company

with HIV/AIDS were Black. Blacks with AIDS often don't live as long as people of other races and ethnic groups with AIDS due to the barriers such as poverty and stigma.

The paper continues by exploring identity and its relationship to language. Next, we discuss how existing systems of beliefs about race, poverty, sexuality, criminal activity, and drug use are used to typify African Americans as subjects in HIV/AIDS discourse. In the methodology section, we elucidate the relationship between identity and language, and its relationship to blogs. The research approach is also presented. We conclude by articulating the results of our analysis, and implications for future research on ethnic identity, language and computer mediated communication (CMC).

Ethnicity Identity and Language

African Americans are not a monolithic group; they are distinguishable along gender, class, age, and socio-economic lines. However, ethnic identity acts as a "tie that binds" this group together. Identity development has been described as a cognitive process by which an individual establishes a relationship with a reference group, with the group being capable of influencing the individual's worldview through the adoption of group values and goals (Greenwald 1988; Thompson & Akbar 2003). Historical oppression is one factor that demonstrates and explains the unique characteristics of African American identity formation (Cross 1995).

For African Americans, identity is developed from a longstanding struggle against White domination marked by slavery, segregation, the great migration, the civil rights movement, and the black power movement. America has a seemingly permanent system of racial meanings and stereotypes that permeates its culture (Omi & Winant 1986). African Americans become aware of their oppression within US society, and their attitudes towards themselves, their ethnic group, and members of other ethnic groups crystallize to form a core sense of identity (Crawford et al. 2002). Identity formation includes coming to a point of positive personal understanding that one's cultural heritage influences who one is, and being an African American serves as the primary reference group to which one belongs (Crawford et al. 2002; Helms 1993). The American experience fostered a protective psychological "banding together", or psychological unification, of individuals of African American descent to protect against oppression in a racist society (Sellers et al. 1998).

Ethnic identity also involves adaptation of the cultural codes such as learning the language to associate and communicate within the community (Hecht, Collier & Ribeau 1993). Giles and Johnson (1981) contend that language is vital to any group's identity and is particularly salient for ethnic groups. African Americans have their own language and communication systems that they use to interpret the meanings of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors. Hoover (1985) and Hecht,

Collier and Ribeau (1993) posit that the African American system of communication includes a number of identifying characteristics listed below:

1. Nonverbal behaviors that send messages through bodily movement, expressions and gestures (Black kinesics) such as eye rolling to indicate disgust, or aggression signified through hands on hips
2. Sociolinguistic rules for speaking such as “code switching” or using Black communication only when speaking with an entirely African American audience, and personal talk used by people who are familiar with and trust one another (i.e. use of the term “girl” among Black women)
3. Audience involvement through call and response
4. Uniqueness expressed through styling and improvisation
5. Emotional intensity exhibited through highly expressive talk and loudness
6. Positivity that demonstrates resilience, calls for religion and spirituality
7. Realism or “telling it like it is”, “keeping it real”, telling stories grounded in reality
8. Assertiveness that calls for outspokenness and standing up for one’s rights
9. Signifying by introducing new lexical items (i.e., “crunk” as a term that combines crazy and drunk) and double meaning (i.e., “tight” or “off the chain” to mean something that is very good)

HIV/AIDS and African Americans

In this study, we examine how aspects of African American identity are performed discursively in a blog community where members possess predetermined knowledge of the culture and feel motivated to discuss HIV/AIDS, a particularly salient issue. Marshall and Bennett (1990) contend that HIV/AIDS is not solely an infectious disease concern for public health professionals. There is also an anthropological dimension that is concerned with exploring the social meaning of HIV/AIDS. Existing systems of beliefs about nationality, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, drug use, and public health policy are woven into HIV/AIDS discourse. In the 1990s, for instance, AIDS was associated with “queers, whores and junkies” who contracted HIV through behaviors outside of mainstream consciousness (Stoller, 1998). As a “disease of the Other”, AIDS was associated with the plague and death, and was viewed as evil (Sontag 1990). More recently, AIDS has been associated with African Americans who are often depicted as hypersexual, promiscuous, drug users, and poor.

We summarize a televised ABC News report to provide examples of how HIV/AIDS discourse constructs African Americans as a high-risk group. The program aired on August 24, 2006, and

can be viewed in its entirety on YouTube³. A synopsis of program is available on line at <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=2346857&page=1>. The program begins with reporter Terry Moran stating a number of stunning statistics on HIV/AIDS and African Americans. Moran then leads segments on “five important reasons why AIDS in Black America is out of control”:

1. Ignorance among People in Power

During a 2004 debate between Vice President Dick Cheney and Senator John Edwards, moderator Gwen Ifill asked each debater to present their views on AIDS policy in the US. Neither debater addressed domestic AIDS policy. Instead, they talked about the African AIDS crisis. According to Ifill, “the reaction I got from folks in the Black community who said, ‘what does this mean. Don’t they care about us?’” It’s not just White leaders who talk a lot more about AIDS in Africa than in the US. Many Black leaders and celebrities also ignore AIDS in America. AIDS activist Pernessa Seele states, “It’s just easier. Because they can go and take a vacation. See the giraffes and zebras. You know, I can go in the village and I can touch the people. And I can have my emotional moment. And I can get on my plane and fly back home and say that I have addressed AIDS, and therefore I don’t have to do anymore”.

2. Government Failure

Despite the staggering number of African Americans living with HIV/AIDS, there is no government policy specifically aimed at this population. Yet, according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, a leading scientist at the National Institutes of Health who has been studying HIV/AIDS for over 25 years, “You could see it coming. All you had to do is sit down and think about it in pure, cold infectious disease terms...So the handwriting was on the wall for some time.”

During the war on drug in the 1980s, state and federal laws sent thousand of street level drug offenders to prison which unwittingly facilitated the spread of HIV/AIDS. Many drug offenders were liable to be infected with HIV from sharing dirty needles. According to Moran, “Prisons are notorious breeding grounds for HIV. Infection rates are five times higher than outside the wall...One study by a national police association found that at least 40% [of incarcerated men] had sex with another man in prison. And despite strong evidence that condoms reduce the spread of AIDS, they are forbidden in all federal and most state and local prisons.” Jim Thomas, professor of public health at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill remarks, “To make condoms available in prison would be to admit that sex occurs in prison. And for some reason the

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEO4z4Y0cmw> (Part 1); http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y_SZajd2lq (Part 2); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44pFQd9aQc> (Part 3); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9R5kAZNpkw> (Part 4); http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nc0E_0jWE9M (Part 5); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVEvkPJJEVto> (Part 6)

prisons don't want to admit that that happens. But if we want to encourage HIV transmission, this is the perfect policy." AIDS activists suggest, although HIV/AIDS testing is available, most inmates are not tested because HIV positive inmates can demand costly treatment. Consequently, as Moran notes, "men can leave prison with HIV and never know it. And most men say that when they leave prison they will resume having sex with women."

Needle exchange programs have proven effective in other countries and could potentially lessen HIV infection rates. However, in 1989 congress banned the use of federal funding for needle exchange programs. Initially fearing that needle exchange would encourage drug use, many Black leaders supported the government's decision. However, by the mid 1990s, most Black leaders had changed their minds. While Dr. Fauci and other leading scientists presented evidence that needle exchange does not promote drug use and helps prevent HIV infection, both President Bush and former President Clinton opposed federal funding for needle exchange.

3. Sex and Patterns of Sexual Behavior

Citing studies from the University of Chicago and North Carolina, Moran states "multiple sexual relations are more than twice as common among Blacks than among Whites, and among Blacks more common for men than for women...It turns out that this pattern of sexual behavior is driven in part by a staggering demographic reality – there are only 85 Black men for every 100 Black women of marriageable age. That is because of a complex mix of vexing problems: infant mortality, violence and disease that all take a higher toll on Black boys growing up in America than on any other racial group." This demographic imbalance, according to Dr. Thomas, favors HIV transmission because it gives men less of an incentive to stay in a relationship and more options to have multiple relations.

The program features a segment on Williamston, a small rural town in North Carolina. Factories and local businesses have shut down, forcing men to leave town to find work. "If you implant an African American male in this community and he makes over the minimum wage and women find out about him, I guarantee at least 50 women will go after him", says Donna Lattimore. In response to the gender imbalance, residents have created sex teams based on the misguided belief that they can avoid HIV by committing to only having sex with others who are part of the group. Debra Fraser-Howze of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS reflects, "If this was about White women, White college students, White youngsters, White anybody, there would be a different response. They used to have a saying 'silence equals death'. Well if that is still true, then this silence is deafening and it's saying to us 'it does equal death and for you guys, it seems to be alright.'"

4. What it means to be Gay and Black

Since 1992, AIDS among gay White men has steadily declined. Affluent and well educated gay White men protested, formed political groups, raised funds, and forced government changes. Phill Wilson, founder of Black AIDS Institute, argues that it was more than gay White males leaping into action. "I think that governmental response happens because the people who are dying are White. Because even though they were gay, they were White and they were male and the power brokers in America are also White and male. So, at some level, there is understanding that this could be my son, this could be my brother, this could be someone in my life."

Gay Black men, however, find it more difficult to receive support from their peers and families. Debra Fraser-Howze asserts, "[W]hen you start talking about homosexuality there is a real problem. Nobody wants to deal with it. I know of few communities as conservative as the African American...especially around sex." Dr. Davide Malebranche, Emory University School of Medicine, discusses the cultural and social forces that shape Black male sexuality. "The image of Black male sexuality being someone who is hypersexual, masculine physique, large genitals, all those kinds of stereotypes that have come back since the time of slavery, that is kind of wrapped up in what Black male sexuality is. Being homosexual or having same sex desire is not going to be compatible with that."

This incompatibility may lead Black males to hide their same sex relations, which has come to be known as "being on the down low" or "DL". Men on the DL publicly present themselves as straight but privately engage in sex with other men. ABC news correspondent Peter Jennings hosted a candid group interview with gay Black men who are living with AIDS. Several men spoke about the social stigma associated with AIDS. "One relative actually had the audacity to tell me that it was a gay disease, that I was an abomination to the body of Christ, that I should have never been born and that I am a disgrace to the family." Another man told the story of how he passed HIV to his wife. For 16 years she suffered alone and in shame - never divulging her status to family members. The man went on to recount a conversation with female friends. He asked the women how they would feel if their male partner told them that they had sex with other men, and the women replied that they wouldn't want to know. When Jennings asked if living openly as a gay Black male is common, one man responded "I think a great majority live a down low life. It is expected from the community, from the family, from the church that Black men marry, have children, live happily ever after."

The scene then cuts to Moran leading a group interview with Black women. When Moran asked if they blame men on the DL, a woman replies with no hesitation, "I absolutely blame men because the new infections for women are overwhelmingly as a result of heterosexual transmission...We

trust and love our men deeply and they are not being honest. They've embraced the lifestyle of the down low which allows them to say 'oh, I'm not gay. I'm just kicking it with my boys.' Which allows them to still be a man over here and be with their boys over there, and we're spreading it like wildfire...But sisters have got to know that we have got to protect ourselves at all cost."

5. A Failure to Lead in the Black Community

At a 2006 conference on AIDS, former NAACP Chairman Julian Bond noted that for the past 25 year no prominent Black leader has made AIDS a priority. According to Reverend Calvin Butts III, "The one voice that continues to be prominent and powerful in the African American community is the church", yet the church hasn't done enough to address AIDS. TD Jakes preaches in front of tens of thousands of people, but does not discuss HIV/AIDS. Jakes notes that there are no biblical scriptures or training at universities to guide clergy on how to address AIDS.

Reverend Eugene Rivers, however, preaches about AIDS and other social issues such as gangs and drugs in his small ministry in one of Baltimore's poorest neighborhoods. "I see the Black church as being challenged as never before to have some tough conversations. These tough, Black conversations are going to happen because the Black church doesn't have an option. Because the Black churches are all that Black people have left...The conspiracy of silence on this sexual, moral, and cultural crisis is suicidal."

Rivers sees a fatal intersection between the silence of Black leaders and a popular culture supported by both Blacks and Whites that is full of images of risky behavior. "We've got a culture that celebrates ignorance and promiscuity and consumerism and the bling-bling. We've got a cultural crisis. We have turned the celebration of misogyny, middle range pornography masquerading as hip-hop into a mainstream industry. And this is something the Black community did... And a Black political leadership class bereft of vision, intellectual direction and a clear moral compass now has failed their children."

The scene cuts to Reverend Jesse Jackson, a highly recognized African American leader. Jackson has spoken about AIDS and was publicly tested for HIV. However, Jackson offers no substantive explanation for why Black political organizations like the Urban League, NAACP, and Rainbow Coalition haven't used their influence to take on AIDS. Moran briefly mentions Jackson's extramarital affair and how this might diminish Jackson's credibility to speak on HIV/AIDS. Jackson replies, "Sometimes it's your own experience that gives you the power to speak, to give truth to crisis, truth to power in ways that matter. And when you do that you become believable."

Methodology

We analyzed a blog community's response to this ABC new report to gain insights into how African Americans perform ethnic identity in this computer mediated environment. Online conversations provide an opportunity to examine how this community uses language to express their unique position as subjects in HIV/AIDS discourse. The relationships among identity, language and CMC are not straightforward. On the one hand, online identity is often deemed to be more performative and discursive due to the anonymity, freedoms of time and space, and absence of physical cues. On the other hand, group communication in asynchronous online environments is often aligned to real world topics and tends to maintain traditional, hegemonic identities, roles, and other ties to physical embodiment (Herring & Martinson 2004).

Authors value blogs because they impose few restrictions on what material is to be posted, which allows anyone with access to a computer to publish their thoughts and let their voice be heard in a public setting. Blogs are valued by audiences opt for news or information that is overlooked, interesting, unexpected, and important. Nardi, Schiano and Grumbrecht (2004) suggest that blogs create the audience, but the audience also creates the blog. This linkage happens in a number of ways: friends urging friends to blog, readers letting authors know they were waiting for posts, authors crafting posts with their audience in mind, and authors continuing discussions with readers in other media outside the blog. Blogs can also serve as a virtual location for the author and audience to disseminate, interpret, provide additional facts, or alternative views on a subject matter. In this way, blogs are community-like in nature. Audiences are no longer passive; they can respond to individual entries and foster conversational exchanges on the blog. The increased popularity of blogging as well as the communicative practices that blogs support and foster makes this a useful site for studying ethnic identity, language, and CMC.

Blogs also have several attractive properties for CMC researchers. Blogs enable researchers to analyze all of the interactions that take place in a single community This approach was taken with the intent to capture the linguistic practices in a community that contribute to its ingroup, exclusive character rather than offering a useful account of more universal features associated with the register of CMC. Communities have unique rules, rituals and social norms that may make sampling across communities problematic. Because the community interactions are logged in their entirety, the data are complete and unmediated by the interview or transcription process. Researchers assume the role of lurkers who unobtrusively observes community engagement, which preserves the purity of the data.

Data Collection and Sampling

The blog under investigation is part of a vibrant community of Black bloggers known as the “Blackosphere”. Francis Hollander (2007) states,

These blogs are by and principally for Black people, focusing not only upon Black people but upon people and issues deemed relevant to the Black people who write these blogs and post comments. At Black blogs, we comment on the issues of the day raised in white newspapers and blogs, but we also highlight issues that whites mostly ignore, such as the unfair criminal prosecution of individual humble and unknown Blacks. Our commentary and the relative importance that we give news are informed by our unique historical perspective on and position in America. From our vantage point, we share with each other a distinct perspective and critique that white people, including white progressives, cannot have and generally do not want.

The blog selected for analysis has been in operation since May 2005, and most posts focus on Black entertainment news and culture. Therefore, while discussions on HIV/AIDS are not the norm, it does provide the opportunity to examine what members of this blog community have to say about this infectious disease.

Our research was driven by two broad questions. First, we identified the salient factors that community members believe contribute to the spread of AIDS in Black America. While factors discussed during the televised report would be present, our interest was in determining if and, if so how, the community provided an oppositional interpretation of these factors. Second, we were interested in the use of Black communication styles like signifying and emotional intensity and CMC techniques like emoticons and turn taking that evidence a collective, self avowed African American identity.

We developed an interpretive approach for coding comments in response to a blog posting that invited audience members to watch a televised ABC News report on HIV/AIDS in the African American community (see Figure 1⁴). Members posted comments from August 24-26, 2006. A total of 128 usable comments groups – 62 posted before the report aired and 66 posted afterwards – were posted, and each comment served as a unit of analysis. Usable comments were those that related specifically to HIV/AIDS, while unusable comments were those that deviated from this topic. A total of 49 community members contributed to the discussion - 21 unique members posted before the television program, and 28 unique members posted afterwards. Nearly half (11) of the individuals posted comments before and after the program aired, which suggests continuity and commitment to the discussion.

⁴ This figure contains a screen shot of the initial blog post that asks readers to watch the ABC News report. The blog post references Terri McMillian, a popular African American female novelist who divorced Jonathan Plummer after he divulged that he was gay. Their appearance on Oprah stimulated discussion about the “down low” lifestyle. The figure is included in a separate file because it is not visible when uploaded to the JCMC Manuscript Central website.

Data Analysis

Coding categories were developed using an emergent protocol that was established through iterative readings of the online discussion. Our approach proceeded in a top-down fashion by first analyzing direct quotations, and purposefully analyzing threads of conversation. Quotations were coded and analyzed according to the themes that they represented. Both authors independently constructed a list of candidate codes based on data analysis. The authors then compared lists, and co-created a common set of codes and associated definitions based on list overlap and joint sense making of the data.

Analyzing blog postings raises an ethical dilemma. On the one hand, users who participate in online communications, such as blogs or message boards, may assume that their correspondence will be kept in confidence. On the other hand, due to their public availability, message archives are used for study, which could potentially pose a human subjects problem. Kraut and colleagues (2004) affirm that research of this type is exempt from federal regulations protecting human subjects if “research involves the collection or study of existing data, documents, records...if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator so that subjects cannot be identified”. Therefore follow the approach adopted by Cousineau and Rancourt (2006) and do not divulge the name of the blog or the screen name of users.

Findings

Our analysis identified two meta-categories of codes:

1. “What is discussed”, i.e. risk factors such as unprotected sex and resistance to negative media portrayals. Risk factors were grouped into three micro-themes: ineffective leadership, Black cultural practices, and individual behaviors.
2. “How it is said”, i.e. Black communication features such as such as interacting (e.g. cosigning), realism (e.g. storytelling and advising), and kinesic (e.g. singing and dancing)

Within each of the two meta-categories, we also noted sub-themes such as White/Black media, good/bad men, and Africa/United States that often expressed dualistic thinking. We also noted comments that referenced events and prominent figures in Black popular culture, use of modified spellings and meanings of mainstream terms, and resistance (e.g. challenging statistics and negative media stereotypes of African Americans). We explicate each category, associated content codes, and exemplary texts in the following section.

What is Discussed

1. Ineffective Leadership

Black clergy and politicians were vehemently criticized for their silence on AIDS (see Table 1). Historically Black clergy have been influential in addressing social problems faced by African Americans. However, they fail to use this influence to tackle HIV/AIDS. One woman states:

Before y'all start on me...no I don't blame T.D. Jakes⁵ for the problems of others and yes I know he has no control over the actions of others, but don't have the attention of millions of viewers and not address these issues. That's where I have problems. God blessed him with the mind and ability to help people in great numbers and all he seems to want to do is put on a show and use his influence to lie to people and scare them into voting for some "C" student that graduated from Yale⁶.

This quote is also representative of community members' belief that Black religious leaders' silence is self-serving. Through their silence, they gain financially by promoting the conservative agenda of the Bush administration. "We've been dealing with HIV/AIDS for 25 years and they still don't know how to address it? If church congregations don't start calling out their so-called leaders they might as well use their tithe money to purchase stock."

While the AIDS crisis in Africa receives well-deserved attention, US government officials were seen as unaware of the AIDS crisis in domestic Black communities. One community member notes:

I gotta give props to ABC for addressing this issue here in 'Merica. To me, it seems like the new thing is to talk about AIDS in Africa but what about here in the US? How fucked up is it that we're 13% of the population but 50% of all new cases? Does no one with authority think that something is wrong when whole towns (not just the one featured in the program) are dying off like this is the Wild Wild West-n-Shit? Major props⁷ for putting the government on blast.⁸

Table 1: Ineffective Leadership Themes

Content	Description	Example from Text
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⁵ T.D. Jakes is a highly visible and influential religious figure who pastors the Potter's House, a non-denominational African American megachurch in Dallas, TX with 23 thousand members. He has also authored 16 novels, several of which appeared on the NY Times best selling list. TD Jakes also produces films and music CDs.

⁶ that 'C' student that graduated from Yale' is a reference to President Bush

⁷ "major props" means proper respect or recognition

⁸ to put "on blast" means to embarrass someone or put them in an awkward position by revealing compromising information

code		
Using religion as a shield	clergy silent because many of the risk factors associated with HIV go against religious doctrine	As for T.D. Jakes and his "it's not in the Bible" Watch this...KISS MY ASS. Leprosy is in the Bible. Read up on it and you'll see how eerily similar it is to AIDS my man.
Selling out	Clergy silent to placate wealthy, conservative supporters	[directed to Bishop T.D. Jakes] Stop that butt kissing and stop taking payoffs. That "C" student that graduated from Yale really doesn't care about black people so stop telling folks how to vote and use your platform for the greater good rather than financial gain.
Failing to exploit influence	Clergy abdicating their historic leadership role in fighting social injustice	Ever listen to some of these political and religious talk shows (radio and TV)? They are highly influential, especially for people that don't research and think for themselves.
Ignoring the problem at home	Leadership focus on the AIDS crisis in Africa while ignoring the US	I especially enjoyed them bringing up celebrities quick to address this problem overseas, but never make a big deal about it in there own backyards.

2. Black Cultural Practices Themes

Cultural themes addressed sensitive topics such as sexual conservatism, class tension, gender politics, and hip-hop music (see Table 2). These cultural factors facilitated the emergence of a self-organizing virtual community borne of individuals who shared similar interests and beliefs independent of their geographic location. Virtual communities have their own collective sense, or cultural make-up, and possess the substance that enables shared experience and shared meaning among its members (Fernback 1999). Hence, participation in the discussion assumes predetermined cultural knowledge.

Hip-Hop culture's negative influence on gender relations was the most salient cultural factor. For instance, one woman identified hip-hop as contributing to misogynist ideals, which in some cases becomes blindly accepted by women.

I was thinking how the hip-hop culture facilitates this tragedy. I don't know the avg. age of the women on here but when Lyte and the Queen⁹ were hot. We stop men from disrespecting us and calling us bitches. Now we are being called "Superhoes" and embracing it. I'm listening to shoulder lean¹⁰ next thing you know I'm saying 'my girl got a girlfriend' W/O thinking.

Community members also critiqued the thug persona popularized in Hip-Hop culture. A male participant notes, "...I had plenty of convos with fellow black males at Rutgers University who

⁹ MC Lyte and Queen Latifah were popular Black feminist rappers in the 1980s

¹⁰ **Shoulder Lean is a popular rap single released by Young Dro in summer 2006**

found it hard to date black women because even the ones in college wanted thugs.” A woman responded to this post by introducing a number of other personas that should be avoided.

@the male participant¹¹. Preach my brotha! I co-sign that shit! There are plenty of good black men out there that we don't have to be lookin at thugs and drug dealers. HOWEVER, by the same token, these same good dudes need to stop solely approaching the model-lookin gold digger type chicks. As an average cute girl when I'm out with my girlfriends that are like that I gets no shine¹². Those type of chicks are only looking for the thuggish, gangsta baller type dude. If you check on her average friend you might find a real chick that you can be down with¹³.

Women’s complicity was also identified as a salient factor by a number of females. “We as women have to stop trying to save these brothas. i'm not about to put my life in jeopardy because ‘deep down he got a good heart’. buck all that, i rather get my 4:20 on¹⁴ and get to know my body myself.”

Table 2: Black Culture Themes

Content code	Description	Example from Text
Conservatism	AIDS and sexuality as taboo subjects	we cannot effectively talk about aids until we address sexuality...we are an extremely conservative race ya'll, but glad the issue is being addressed.
Classism	High income people receive better treatment	Magic git the virus but this man is being treated like the new coming of the lord. But what happens to my everyday man/woman who doesn't have Magic's ¹⁵ money? (responding to the previous comment) <i>Screename</i> , my friend...they die. It's just simply the facts.
Female complicity	Role women play in the transmission of HIV	On a different note, as far as the Precious Jackson's ¹⁶ out there who are getting burned by bums that are in and out of jail that is a self-esteem/co-dependence problem.
Hip-Hop's influence on gender relations	Influence of machismo, drugs, and misogynist lyrics and	<i>Screename</i> , Let me add to that. That new song by whatever her name...Shareefa (on Luda's label), SWSNBN, and Sharissa ¹⁷ are all guilty of perpetuating that damn stereotype of “wanting a thug”. Let me clue these dumb clucks into what it means to have a thug ¹⁸ ...1. It means that you'll have to

¹¹ “@screename” is commonly used as a “call and response” mechanism to signify strong agreement with a comment made by *screename*

¹² “no shine” means no attention

¹³ “be down with” means a relationship based on dedicated commitment

¹⁴ “get my 4:20 on” is a reference to smoking marijuana

¹⁵ Magic Johnson, former NBA player and business mogul who became one of the first celebrities to publicly acknowledge that he contracted HIV from unprotected sex

¹⁶ Precious Jackson is a Black woman popularized by the media for contracted AIDS from a male partner engaged in the down-low lifestyle.

¹⁷ Shareefa is a new R&B artist on rapper Ludacris' label, She Who Shall Not Be Named (SWSNBN) is R&B singer Beyonce Knowles, Sharissa is a new R&B singer.

¹⁸ As slain rapper Tupac Shakur defined it, a thug is someone who is going through struggles

¹⁹ Lace fronts are wigs with realistic hairlines in the front

	depictions of women in rap videos and lyrics	remove your lace fronts ¹⁹ when you visit said thug in the pen. 2. Hopefully when the “po-po” ²⁰ raids your home, the state won’t take your children away. 3. Thugging doesn’t have a 401K plan.
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3. Individual Behavior

The discussions migrated from political/religious ineptitude and cultural beliefs to one of personal responsibility (see Table 3). There were both cries of despair and pillars of social support being erected that noted unprotected sex as a factor that leaves partners at risk. For instance, a woman used a narrative to stress the negative ramifications of unprotected sex.

At least fear of 'getting caught' kept me to myself as a teenager. "Preggers" as we affectionately call it on here, was within itself birth control for me...or was it my mama's fist? AIDS is much bigger and may I repeat these young ladies just don't care!!! My 16 y.o. cute as hell cousin is a whore on wheels and she thinks it's funny to have unprotected sex. HELP!!!

Women were also critical of casual sex, even if condoms are being used. They often used expressive talk to tell humorous stories that are grounded in reality, yet exaggerate the truth.

Screenname I know your friend, but she's in her forties and "life ain't nothing but a party" to her. Eddie Murphy and Rick James must have been talking about her when they sang "Party All The Time"²¹. This woman claims to use condoms and makes that the first thing that comes out of her mouth when she describes her sexcapades with strange men.... I'm exaggerating a bit here but you'll get my point. It's basically like this with her when it comes to men: If she gets treated to a bucket of chicken, she's being treated like a princess. If biscuits and honey are included, she's being treated like a queen.

Women also expressed positivity as they direct others to protect themselves. “this is a major subject african americans can start addressing majorly...educate, practice and prevention can spare your life. i always request my partner to have an aids test done before we engage in sex and then i too uses condoms and lubricant on top of the testing. always keep it real and safe people.”

Table 3: Individual Behavior

Content code	Description	Example from Text
Risky sex practices	Unprotected casual sex that places partners at risk	...someone remind me to tell all of my teenage boy cousins who believe that condoms take away the feeling so they don't use them.
Safer sex	Protected sex,	I'm not discounting the value of condom use at all, but why are

²⁰ po-po is slang for the police

²¹ “Party All the Time” was a single recorded by comic actor Eddie Murphy in 1985, written and produced by Rick James

practices	between casual or committed partners	people so comfortable with hoe-hopping just because they're using condoms? Are people still interested in building friendships and relationships, or is it all about "bustin' a nut"?
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4. Resistance

The appeal of blogs is their unvarnished emotional sharing of self. Accounts that are posted are considered real, and adopt a critical stance that is often missing in traditional journalism outlets. Community members strongly refuted the negative portrayals of African Americans in both mainstream and Black media (see Table 4). Members questioned the statistics and the focus on African Americans because they felt that this unfairly vilifies Blacks, especially males, as a high-risk group. Members also talked of the effects of racism (not just us) and patriarchy (not just women).

While members criticized the media, they were appreciative that White journalists produced the program and brought the HIV/AIDS issue to the forefront. Others used their positive acknowledgment of the White media to question the perceived inaction by Black media. For instance, one woman noted, "I'm definitely watching, although I'm appalled it took a 'White' journalist to take this on and bring it to the national spotlight. But, on second thought, I shouldn't really be surprised..."

In addition to critiques on media effectiveness, there were calls for individual agency. Members were encouraged to spread the word and get involved in their communities. There were also calls for individuals to change their behaviors, and in doing so, change African American culture. In calls for media reform and individual behavior change, there are clear linguistic markers such as "they" and "us", ABC and BET²² to demarcate the outgroup and the ingroup, which serves as additional evidence of a shared group identity.

Table 4: Resistance

Content code	Description	Example from Text
Not just us	Questioning why the media focuses on Blacks	Looking forward to it...although I hope they talk about AIDS in other communities as well. We ain't the only ones affected.
Not just women	Questioning the focus on women	I just don't understand how we can even attempt to understand what's going on in our community when our men are absent from the discussion and I believe it is because we would have to start talking about gay sex.
Statistics ain't right	Questioning statistics on	If a population gets tested a lot, they will have more people 'testing positive'. About 2/3 of African Americans have been

²² BET is the Black Entertainment Television station owned by VIACOM. BET is also called "Barely Entertainment Television" on this blog to signify members' dissatisfaction with the quality of programming on the channel.

	AIDS	tested, compared to under 1/2 of White Americans...I think the exaggeration of 'the epidemic' is as much exaggerated among African Americans as it is among Africans and Indians.
Pushing stereotypes	Stereotypical portrayal of Blacks by White media	...i'm just praying that it's not one of those "black women get aids cuz of dudes on the dl" ²³ features (responding to the previous comment) <i>@Screenname</i> I feel you on the media portrayal of black men. One year they are all philandering deadbeat dads and the next they are all on the DL. We know who is in control of the media.
Black media Programming priorities	Disappointment with Black media reporting on AIDS	The fact that i was seeing all these white people visibly uncomfortable but doing this out of a place of concern and i just was so mad thinking WHY IS ABC DOING THIS AND NOT BET (them coons is good to feature crackheads, rude women and ass but not to unmask this shit for what it is...)
Seeking media balance	Fair portrayals of Blacks in the media	As someone who lost two cousins to AIDS, I want the show to reflect the reality of AIDS, not a media sensationalized version of the truth.
Spreading the word	Proactive discussion and response to the AIDS crisis	I've been hearing about this show all day long on the radio and dare not miss it. Get the word out, people...Serious stuff. I'm open for some "real talk" on this matter.
Changing our culture	Focus on making positive change in Black culture	Don't think other people/races/cultures didn't already know about us before some television expose'. They know more about us than some of us think they do. They know because they work in social services, healthcare and the criminal justice system, to name a few... We bring them our drama... To change our culture and mindset is to change us, otherwise the vicious cycle continues.

How Was It Said?

Community members used variety of Black communication conventions that were captured in three themes: communicative interaction, social support, and kinesics. Gates (1988) contends that Black speakers share a common cultural literacy and employ specific uses of figurative language to share, repeat, critique, and revise information. Features of Black oral communication tradition such as creating new meanings for old words, telling stories and offering testimonials, and speaking with the body found expression in CMC.

1. Communicative Interaction

Communicative interaction (see Table 5) conveys styles of speech and cultural understanding that express a shared identity and language. Analysis uncovered conversational elements such as call-and-response (e.g. using "*@screenname*" or "*co-sign*" to acknowledge and respond to a prior comment) and dissent (e.g. back talking). Community members also signified by introducing

²³ "on the DL" means being on the down low – men who publicly embrace a heterosexual lifestyle while engaging in covert sexual relations with men . DL men do not self-identify as gay or bisexual.

self-defined terms for AIDS such “the A.I”, “ill wit disease” and “A. I. Die Slowly”. Emotional intensity was strongly evidenced as community members conversed about how Terry Moran strongly reprimanded Jessie Jackson and T.D. Jakes for their silence regarding the HIV/AIDS in African American communities.

Table 5: Communicative Interaction

Content Code	Explanation	Example from Texts
Signifying	Constructing new terms for talking about AIDS in a culturally salient way	I was really surprised they didn't bring up DC's stats...LOTTA people walking around here with the A.I. ...ain't that the truth I'm not trying to get no A.I. Die Slowly from no prison penis I preach to the young'uns every chance I get that dick will kill you.
Back talking	Assertively challenging a previous comment	...There are plenty of legitimate, law-abiding black men out there for black women to not rely on settling with an ex-con [male commenter] <i>@male commenter – Where?! Cause I'm in New York!</i>
Co-signing	expressing strong agreement with or building upon a previous comment	One thing I would suggest to all sisters, is that the minute that Negro is released from prison carry his ass down to the clinic. Fo real. Can't even tell ya how many of us are getting burnt by yard birds ²⁴ ...and if he says no, then he is already telling you something [female commenter 1] <i>@ female commenter 1 - I hear y'all on the prison dudes. Oh yes, protect yourself from those cats but also protect yourself from the dudes in the business suits too. We can all play but just change the game a little. [female commenter 2]</i> <i>@ female commenter 2- Agreed. Protection should be universal. I'm just focusing on sistas who go after ex-cons because in prisons the HIV/AIDS rate is something like 5-8x higher than the regular population. [female commenter 1]</i>
Emotional Intensity	Highly expressive, loud speech that challenges	THE LOOK ON JESSE JACKSON'S FACE WAS PRICELESS! PRICELESS I TELL YA! PRICELESS! I just got finished watching it too! He was looking like "no this muthafucka didn't" (<i>first commenter</i>) ...I missed last night. What was said that drew such a reaction? (<i>second commenter</i>)

²⁴ “yardbirds” are men in prison

²⁵ “calling him on his sideline ho” – publicly announcing dissatisfaction with a powerful man who is perceived as not taking necessary action to redress an important issue. “Calling” is the signifying element while the “sideline ho” or adultery is the transgression that Reverend Jackson is being “called out” on.

²⁶ In 2001, Reverend Jesse Jackson admitted that he had an affair and fathered a child out of wedlock

		Tha reporter called him on his sideline ho ²⁵ ...that's what happened with Jesse [Jackson]..he cut him off mid-sentence told him to stop talking bout Africa and focus on the US and then he dabbled into his affair ²⁶ ...FACE WAS PRICELESS INDEED!
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2. Communal Support

Communal support demonstrates caring among community members. Community was often evidenced through greetings in which community members were referred to as family, and by their screen-names (see Table 6). What is perhaps most striking is the realism and emotional intensity in the stories that were shared. Hill-Collins (1986) notes that African American females exhibit an ethic of caring and personal accountability in their personal interactions. Similarly, Scott (2000) finds and honesty and sisterhood expressed in African American women's conversations that demonstrates intimacy, supports individuality, and allows women to criticize and assertively request action without compromising friendship. Some members felt comfortable enough to express utter despair, not knowing where to turn. These cries for help were often conveyed through testimonials about family members and friends engaged in risky sexual practices.

Me three y'all. I have "that cousin". I can't help but get disgusted every time I see her or hear her name. Not only did she seek, she found. I hate to put cuz on blast, but all he did was give her hell. She's one of those that just doesn't get it and thinks that it will all work itself out. Needless to say she is not my favorite cousin, but to the best of my knowledge she is HIV neg. Hell, he can't stay home long enough to do anything but get in more trouble.

Community was also expressed through calls for uplifting Black women.

Morning all,@Screenname - "my friend in my head" You could not have said it better. Everything you have said thus far is the truth. How can we expect someone else to help us when we won't help ourselves. Why did it take ABC to address an issue the definitely should have been addressed by our own community. Instead of us breaking each other down, why can't we lift up for a change.

Table 6: Communal Support Themes

Content Code	Explanation	Example from Texts
Advising	Suggesting safer-sex behaviors to others	One thing I would suggest to sistahs is to STOP going to the prison house looking for a man.
Consoling	Seeking consolation from sadness, happiness, or other emotions	I come to you again with a very heavy heart so I hope you guys can cheer me up. After watching that program last night, I felt like I'd been in the ring with Mike Tyson ²⁷ .

²⁷ former world heavy weight boxing champion

Helping others	Convincing others to take charge of their health	Also, we have got to start looking out for each other. If you have a friend whom you know is sexually active with multiple partners and you care about her/him.....please try to tell them how important it is to protect themselves. They may be tired of hearing it or there is a remote chance they'll actually listen. This is not a big city problem, this is not a gay folks problem, this is not a poor people's problem, this is ALL of our problem.
Testifying	Telling stories to make or support a comment	...OMG...my home-girl did that and now she is miserable...got a prison cat. He didn't burn her, but dat ni**a is ill wit a disease. Man, I don't even wanna get started.
Familying	Greeting using terms to address fictive family	I regret to inform my family, but I will not be watching this. The media sucks, and ya'll no [sic] damn well AIDS is not just a black disease, hell it's a human disease... I don't want to hear about this nonsense.

3. Kinesics

Kinesic is perhaps the most creative use of language because it adds non-verbal elements that enrich communication. Community members sang, laughed, danced and performed actions to enliven the conversation and incorporate visual elements (see Table 7). Oftentimes, these gestures were set between asterisks (*) as a way to differentiate the function of these texts.

Table 7: Bodily Movement

Content Code	Explanation	Example from Texts
Performing	A rhetorical device used to suggest some pertinent action	***tousles her hair and gets off the podium with raw emotion*** (I had to, otherwise I'd be sad today) *sets TiVo*
Dancing	using written words to convey a visual image of the author dancing	*doing the cabbage patch* 1 st baby!!!!!!!]
Singing	Using written words to convey the singing of a song	Singing "I need a boss with a job like HEY, with a 401K!"
Laughing	Using words to depict laughter	lol, those chicks be in heat! Receiving those late night jail calls and getting all hot and bothered and then they're trapped!

Discussion

When it comes to HIV/AIDS, a leading cause of death in the African American community, there is a pervasive wall of silence. However, healthy communities must address issues that threaten their survival and affect members' wellbeing. To restore communicative elements of community

diminished through this lack of dialogue, African Americans have constructed virtual communities. Communicators in these virtual communities perform ethnic identity through the use of language. For instance, participants describe themselves in collective terms such as “us”, “our”, and “black people” as well as familiar terms such as “home girl”, “sistahs” and “brotha”. These self avowed identities suggest that ethnicity is an essential characteristic that finds expression in a public realm constituted in discourse.

Participants frame their interaction within broader cultural and institutional contexts that have, through their silence and inaction, contributed to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Community members’, for instance, critiqued the mainstream media’s representation of Blacks. Participants also found that Black identity was unacceptably presented in Hip-Hop culture and Black media outlets like BET, the only African American oriented channel on television. So, although Blacks may view programs on BET and immerse themselves in Hip-Hop culture, these actions do not imply respect and trust. Even the venerable Black church, which has historically served as the primary institution supporting African American interests, has done little to address the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Online communities provide an alternative venue for information dissemination and social support. In this study, the blogger implored members to watch the program and share their responses to the program. After viewing the program, community members encouraged individuals to share information, get tested and use condoms. However, community members did not blindly accept the information that was presented during the program. They questioned the statistics, provided explanations for why the figures overstate the proportion of HIV infections among African Americans compared to other racial/ethnic groups, and critically analyzed how science is often misused to legitimize negative portrayals of Black people.

When articulating critiques and calls for action, participants invoked ascribed identities such as “yard birds”, “dudes on the dl”, “prison dudes”, “thugs”, “dumb clucks” and “whore on wheels” to depict those at higher risk for contracting HIV. Participants also resisted identities that associated HIV/AIDS with African Americans (We ain’t the only ones affected) and Black women (black women get aids cuz of dudes on the dl). The agency to resist these ascribed identities is situated in and often in opposition to the institutional power structure of existing AIDS discourse.

Finally, group members’ interpretation of the linguistic practices used to perform identity online is enhanced through a number of commonly used CMC techniques. For instance, signification, kinesics and side conversations suggest playfulness and provide levity which might make it easier to discuss uncomfortable topics like HIV/AIDS. Co-signing simulates turn taking by citing previous exchanges and creating the appearance of dialogue that suggest temporal immediacy.

This bolsters coherence, improves addressability among participants, and provides a mechanism for offering evaluative feedback. Community members create identifiable personalities through screen names and avatars, small images used in blogs and chat forums that enable users to personalize their identity. Participants often address one another by screen name and used terms of endearment (“my family”, “my friend”). Participants also create a sense of presence and give the community intimacy through the use of language to express action (doing the cabbage patch), inner state (tousles her hair and gets off the podium with raw emotion - I had to, otherwise I’d be sad today), and place (I might come back here during the show for some live feedback if anybody is interested).

Future Research

This study provides some initial insights into Black identity performance in a CMC environment. In analyzing the blog community’s discussion in response to a televised report on HIV/AIDS, we may actually be examining an unnatural framing of the issues and spike in discussion. It may therefore be worthwhile to examine online discussions in the future to empirically test the explanatory power of the themes found in the current study.

This study also examines a single blog, which leaves open the possibility that the findings may not be appropriately generalized. Replication with other African American blogs would be necessary to see if the same issues have been discussed, and if so, the nature of those exchanges.

Finally, the study focuses on online African Americans. The conversations found on these blogs may, however, positively impact African Americans outside of the blog community. Although African American Internet users may be primarily classified as middle or upper-middle class, their social interactions span class, with upper and middle income individuals in frequent contact with poorer friends and family (Pattillo 2006). This social interaction may increase the likelihood that poorer African Americans who do not have access to computers will have access to the information disseminated in these virtual sites through proxy and weak tie associations. Information sharing through weak ties further suggests that online communities may serve as an effective dissemination mechanism for delivering public health messages to seemingly hard to reach African American populations.

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