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Has Urban Become the New Mainstream?

By Angela D. Johnson

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This holiday season, the often scantily-clad rapper Lil' Kim is hawking winter wear for Old Navy. After television campaigns featuring white-bread celebrity spokespeople, such as Fran Drescher and Morgan Fairchild, the appearance of Lil' Kim may seem a little out of step for the San Francisco-based clothing retailer. But Old Navy is actually trying to tap into what a growing number of companies have realized: urban culture sells -- especially in the mainstream youth market.

In the past, the term "urban" was used to describe things relating to inner-city African Americans and Latinos. Today, "urban" describes a mindset held by young people of various races and ethnicities that is influenced by a city or "urban" lifestyle.

But, urban is not just hip-hop. It's white skateboarders congregating at New York City's Astor Square; it's Asian Americans and Latinos in California souping up their rides with aftermarket gear; it's the lives lived by the characters on NBC's "Friends."

"The urban thing is a black, brown and cream thing," said Damon Haley, senior vice president of the Urban Marketing Corporation of America (UMCA) in Los Angeles.

Because the urban market is based on psychographic rather than demographic characteristics, it is more difficult to define than the African-American or Latino market. Urban-marketing specialists agree that the market consists mostly of teens and young adults, ranging from about 12 to 30 years old. Estimates from urban-marketing agencies, such as New York's Vigilante and UMCA, position the size of the urban market between 30 million and 50 million, making it 10 percent to 17 percent of the total U.S. population.

Alain Sylvain, associate director of Vigilante's Urban Think Tank, said defining the urban market is "something that people are struggling with because there's obviously money in it." Vigilante has estimated the buying power of the urban market at more than \$300 million, annually. In comparison, the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia reports that African Americans control \$687.7 billion.

In 2001, UrbanIQ, the now-defunct market-research arm of Vanguard Media, released a report in which it attempted to define the urban market. When dissecting the racial composition of the urban market, the study revealed that it was 18.5 percent black, 17.4 percent Latino, 4.4 percent Asian American and 59.2 percent white. While 48.4 percent lived in the country's top Designated Market Areas or DMAs, the remaining half made their homes in small cities or rural areas.

It is this significant portion of whites, plus the urban market's reach to middle America that have caught the attention of marketers looking for new ways to attract mainstream consumers. Companies have witnessed the impact of urban, a culture driven by African Americans and Latinos and heavily influencing whites. Haley described this influence as the bowling pin scenario.

"If you get the urban community to accept your project, then you can knock down the rest of the world," Haley said.

Being exposed to urban culture is "like being around music and not moving," Haley added. "Once you're in that geography, that attitude is going to have a certain adaptation."

Haley said companies such as Nike, Reebok and Motorola have done a stellar job at reaching consumers with an urban approach. But this leads to an interesting question. Which industries benefit the most from urban marketing?

"I think the categories where you can do (urban marketing) are somewhat limited," said Howard Buford, CEO of New York-based advertising agency Prime Access. Buford, who has coined the term "urban majority" to describe the agency's target consumers (African Americans, Latinos, and gays and lesbians), said image-driven products, such as clothing and cars, lend themselves best to urban-styled marketing campaigns.

For those companies that believe the urban approach is right for their products, marketing specialists are quick to warn that it takes more than just dropping the latest rap star into a commercial. Sylvain said urban-marketing campaigns need to have a very authentic consumer insight. He offered a recent Heineken commercial featuring rapper Jay-Z as an example. The commercial is set in a lush house, supposedly the rapper's home. As Jay-Z searches for a beverage with which to refill the champagne glass of an attractive female guest, he bypasses expensive champagnes, such as Crystal, and other beverages to select a bottle of Heineken. Sylvain, whose agency created the spot, said the lavishly decorated home, the beautiful woman and the Crystal all were elements of what is perceived to be the urban lifestyle.

Sylvain provided the Mitsubishi commercial, a spot devoid of hip-hop music, as another example of urban marketing in action. In the ad, a group of white kids ride along in a Mitsubishi Eclipse listening to a trance-pop song by Dirty Vegas as the woman in the passenger seat sporting a Kangol cap is dancing in her seat.

The music, the hat and the woman's style of dance all are outgrowths of urban culture.

While companies such as Heineken and Mitsubishi may be sold on the idea of using urban marketing to reach mainstream consumers, there is debate about who should create these ads.

"Some brands believe there's a certain amount of credibility with a big agency," said Sylvain, whose own agency has a staff of about 30 employees, but is a part of Publicis.

"The difficult thing about a big company doing a good job is that often times the company has to serve a different audience than the execution will serve," said Haley. The creative "has to fit the framework of a conference room of people who don't have the sensitivity" needed to understand the urban message.