

**ARE MARKETERS USING HIP-HOP MUSIC LIKE STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY TO  
SUPPORT DEI INITIATIVES? A REVISED IMC FRAMEWORK TO ADDRESS  
CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

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**Keywords**

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**Description**

Our study uses Büyükokutan's (2011) Theory of Cultural Appropriation to propose a revised integrated marketing communications (IMC) framework to help marketing managers figure out how to best include DEI initiatives in their messaging while also considering the cultural appropriation of certain tactics, like using hip-hop music in commercials.

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

### Research Question

How and when should brands incorporate hip-hop culture into their integrated marketing communications (IMC) campaigns?

### Introduction

By infusing hip-hop culture into their marketing efforts, brands attempt to signal that they, too, are authentic, like *Kroger* did when they centered their 2019 brand relaunch around Flo Rida's song, "Low." *Kroger* stated the song promoted their supermarket's "low" prices in a creative way that also allowed the brand to "celebrate diversity." While the song's hook is catchy, the lyrics about appreciating a stripper's ability to "get low" run counter to the Ohio-based retailer's Midwest heritage. *Kroger* escaped a reputation-damaging firestorm over its use of a song that objectified women, but the "Get Low" commercial was poorly received.

The rise in hip-hop-infused campaigns is likely due to a new generation of marketers who understand how rappers are perceived as authentic and who believe that hip-hop's inherent diversity supports diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives for inclusive imagery, without taking into account either the brand's image or hip-hop's origins in the 1970s as an outlet for expressing anger at social inequalities that shaped many Black people's lives (Wang 2018). The *Kroger* example also illustrates the point that hip-hop music is at risk of being commoditized like interchangeable stock photography when cultural appropriation is not considered as part of the IMC planning process.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Using Büyükokutan's (2011) Theory of Cultural Appropriation, we reconceptualize the integrated marketing communications (IMC) framework, indicating how DEI could be conceptually positioned within IMC planning. First, we selected Clow and Baack's (2017) IMC framework with six planning stages as the foundation. The first step is communication research, followed by determining the target audience, product position, goals, budget, and IMC tactics.

Next, the six stages of the IMC framework are reconceptualized using the lens of Büyükokutan's (2011) Theory of Cultural Appropriation. This theoretical perspective considers appropriation, like a brand's IMC program using hip-hop music, as a reciprocal, non-negotiable intergroup exchange. Before appropriating, Büyükokutan (2011) advises cultural appropriators to research the owners' different histories, resources, and materials. Our revised IMC framework incorporates consideration for cultural appropriation as a key part of the communications research and tactics stages. Marketers should only use hip-hop music in IMC campaigns after careful planning. This is to make sure that the music fits with the brand and to avoid cultural appropriation when using music, fashion, or design that the brand didn't create.

## **Summary of Findings**

We tested our conceptual framework using the *Kroger* example and found that considering cultural appropriation during IMC planning ensures that messages and tactics align and support a standardized brand promotion. Using our reconceptualized IMC framework with its stages addressing DEI initiatives would have prevented *Kroger's* 2019

"Fresh for Everyone" brand relaunch from being built around Flo Rida's "Low," saving the company from a poorly received campaign.

*Kroger's* "Get Low" commercial debuted on the grocery store's *YouTube* channel on January 5, 2021, and received 900,000 views in its first month, but more negative feedback than positive (30,000 dislikes to 23,000 likes). After the commercial aired, customers began posting parody ads on social media with the caption "*Kroger* Ad But...", implying that the "Get Low" commercial was inconsistent with *Kroger's* brand image. DJones 5559's *YouTube* comment on *Kroger's* "Get Low" commercial, "As a *Kroger* employee, I'm sitting here wondering what our marketing team was smoking," received 11,000 likes (YouTube 2021).

Our revised IMC plan helps brands reach their campaign goals without worrying about being accused of cultural appropriation or causing unintentional confusion about their values, which could make consumers feel less positive about the company (Keller 2016) resulting in less than desirable business outcomes.

### **Statement of Key Contributions**

When attempting to market themselves as diverse and gain access to niche markets, more brands are infusing hip-hop culture into their IMC campaigns. When brands attempt to be more daring with their creative execution, they fail to recognize how quickly brand trust can be eroded. Fortunately, *Kroger* avoided having to explain why it chose a catchy hip-hop song that openly objectifies women as a way to "celebrate diversity."

The *Kroger* example also highlights how hip-hop music risks becoming commoditized like an interchangeable stock photo when brands want to signal their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts through marketing communication programs without considering the cultural appropriation of music originally created to express anger at social inequalities and injustices.

Our updated IMC framework enables brands to achieve their campaign objectives without fear of being accused of cultural appropriation or causing unintentional confusion about their values, which could lead to negative feelings about the brand (Keller 2016) and result in poor business outcomes.

References are available upon request.