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**Health, Weight, and Fitness Messages in *Ebony* and *Essence*:
A Framing Analysis of Articles in African American Women's Magazines**

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Abstract

In the past century, much of the U.S. population has moved from a lifestyle revolving around healthy eating and physical activity to a lifestyle of consuming calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods and engaging in relatively little physical activity. These behaviors have played a significant role in the rise of overweight and obese citizens in the U.S., making both serious public health issues. We used framing analysis to examine the editorial content of two top-rated African American women's magazines, *Essence* and *Ebony*, throughout 2008 and 2009, with a focus on the topics of excessive weight, body image, health, and fitness/exercise. Our analysis revealed four themes in the presentation of health messages: race and identity, wellness, faith, and connection. Race and identity are featured as a connecting fabric that forms the background for the experiences of story subjects and readers. Wellness connects the multiple parts of health, fitness, and image by creating a holistic and racially filtered view of what is "healthy." Faith is a foundation on which wellness can be built and defines race and connection. Connection features the importance of those links among the individual, family, and community. Together, the themes create a coherent frame for the presentation and understanding of health, weight, and fitness in the African-American community. Practical implications for this research are discussed.

Keywords: community, health communication, identity, race, wellness, women's magazines

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Introduction

In the past century, much of the U.S. population has moved from a lifestyle revolving around healthy eating and physical activity to a lifestyle of consuming calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods and engaging in relatively little physical activity. These behaviors have played a significant role in the rise of overweight and obesity in the U.S., making both serious public health issues. The prevalence of obesity increased in the U.S. between 1976-1980 and 1988-1994 and again between 1988-1994 and 1999-2000 (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin, 2010). This trend continues today (Fryar, Carroll, & Ogden, 2012). Fryar et al. (2012) state that in 2009-2010, 35.9% of adults age 20 and over were obese and 69.2% were overweight (including obese). Commonly categorized using the Body Mass Index (BMI), which is weight divided by height, overweight is a BMI between 25.0–29.9, obesity is a BMI ≥ 30.0 , and extreme obesity is a BMI ≥ 40.0 (Fryar et al., 2012). For many, this increase in weight has serious health consequences. Being classified as overweight or obese increases one's risk of heart disease, certain cancers, stroke, Type II diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, stroke, and sleep apnea (Office on Women's Health, 2013).

As the weight epidemic continues to have a dramatic impact on the U.S. population, the effects of being overweight or obese are even more widespread among African Americans. In 2007, African Americans had a 51% higher incidence of obesity than White Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). African-American women have the highest rates of being overweight and obese compared to any other ethnic group in the U.S. (Office on Women's Health, 2013). According to Fryar and colleagues (2012), "among women in 2009–2010, non-Hispanic black women (58.5%) were significantly more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic white women (32.2%)" (p. 1). Moreover, approximately 80% of African American women are overweight or obese (Office on Women's Health, 2013). This is evident in the health consequences they suffer. For example, death rates from diabetes and heart disease are two to three times higher for African American women than for White women (Kumanyika, Morssink, & Nestle, 2001).

Current evidence suggests dietary habits are a primary contributor to weight gain (Guo, Warden, Paeratakul, & Bray, 2004; Swinburn, Caterson, Seidell, & James, 2004). Diets high in calorie-dense foods (those high in fat and/or sugar) are associated with the development and maintenance of obesity and weight-related health problems, while diets with a significant portion of fruits, vegetables and whole grains tend to be associated with lower BMI scores and better health (Guo et al., 2004; Swinburn et al., 2004). Sealy (2010) found that African-American and Hispanic parents were more likely to add sugar, sodium and fat-based products while cooking than were Caribbean parents. Furthermore,

and applications of mentorship and leadership. Dinecia Gates is a teaching instructor and academic advisor for the School of Communication at East Carolina University. Her research focuses on media effects and examining social and racial inequities that affect marginalized and minority populations in health, life, and leadership.

participants indicated that their children had a less healthy diet, with more fast-food consumption, than their own diets when they were young.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, African Americans are 50% less likely than non-Hispanic Whites to engage in physical activity (The Office of Minority Health, 2009). Brownson, Eyer, King, Brown, and Sallis (2000) found that physical activity among African Americans and American Indian/Alaskan Natives was lower than among other racial/ethnic groups.

A major focus for health communication scholars, is determining what kinds of messages contribute to the adoption and/or maintenance of healthy behaviors. One way in which individuals learn about healthy lifestyle is from the media. In fact, Americans consistently rely on the media more than any other source for information on health (Brodie, Kjellson, Hoff, & Parker, 1999; Moyer, Vishnu, & Sonnad, 2001; Parrott, 1996). Women in particular use magazines to obtain health information, and women's magazines tend to serve as a point of discussion on health issues (Barnett, 2006; Lumpkins, Cameron, & Frisby, 2012; Moyer et al., 2001).

Magazines have the power to influence, confirm, and create opinions, health practices, and decisions among African-American women. Given the alarming rates of excessive weight in African American women, we argue that it is critical to examine health messages in magazine content directed to this audience. This study examines how the editorial content of two top-rated African American women's magazines, *Essence* and *Ebony*, in 2008 and 2009, frames messages on excessive weight, body image, health, and fitness/exercise. *Essence* and *Ebony* magazines are sources to which African American women look for information and advice in various areas of their lives including home, finance, cooking, fashion, and even weight loss and exercise.

Media Framing

People actively work to organize and interpret information to make sense of their life experiences (Goffman, 1974). Frames allow individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" the vast array of information in the social world (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Although Goffman's work on framing emerges from a sociological perspective, numerous scholars have adapted this concept for use in news and mediated contexts where a wealth of information is distributed on a daily basis.

Framing has been referred to as second-level agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), focusing on the attributes (i.e., adjectives) that journalists use in discussing the topics they have chosen to cover. Framing can be found in both the verbal and visual components of a given story (McCombs, 1997). As summarized by Entman (1993):

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

In other words, journalists frame by simplifying and highlighting certain concepts and issues while obscuring or ignoring others (Del Zotto, 2002; Luther & Miller, 2005). Furthermore, Del Zotto (2002) argues that “media give meaning to specific events by selectively choosing the words and images that describe the events. In turn, the meaning of an event is framed as the only possible meaning and we organize our conduct, attitude and belief system accordingly” (p. 142).

Pan and Kosicki (1993) argue that “we may conceive a news media frame as a cognitive device used in information encoding, interpreting, and retrieving; it is communicable” (p. 57). They go on to state that framing can “be studied as a strategy of constructing and processing news discourse” (p. 57). Scholars argue that consistent media frames that are (re)produced throughout media content may be associated with media consumers’ perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors on a given topic (Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Media framing can affect how people understand health messages, particularly women, who obtain health information from the media (Moyer et al., 2001). Moreover, Jo (2004) argues that when examining news editorial content, its effectiveness is enhanced by the strength of arguments presented.

Media Messages on Health

For the purposes of this investigation, previous research can be grouped in two areas: (a) focusing on mainstream media and (b) looking specifically at media aimed at the African-American population. These are outlined below.

Mainstream Health Messages

Several studies have used framing analyses to explore media content focused on individual-level causes and solutions related to obesity. For example, Lawrence (2004) found that *The New York Times* experienced a fivefold increase in stories on obesity between 1985 and 2003 and the focus of these articles evolved from a biological framing of the causes of obesity to personal and systemic causes. In 2007, Kim and Willis published similar findings, indicating an increase in the number of stories reporting on obesity from 1997 to 2003; furthermore, both obesity causes and solutions were discussed more often in terms of individual behaviors than societal-level issues. By contrast, Gearhart, Craig and Steed (2011), who reviewed television news stories on obesity in 1995-1999 and 2005-2009, saw a shift from individual to societal-level focus between the first and second set of data. Overall, this suggests that mainstream health news coverage of obesity has risen over the past twenty years, and that although much of the focus was on individual-level causes and solutions, more current media content also considered systemic issues. It is interesting to note that we found

very few if any references to race or cultural issues in these studies, even though systemic disparities often develop along racial lines.

Health Messages Aimed at African Americans

Another area of research, however, suggests that the way media currently speak to African-American women through advertising, entertainment, and editorial content, may contribute to their high rates of weight problems (Henderson & Kelly, 2005; Kean & Prividera, 2007). According to Henderson and Kelly (2005), television entertainment programs targeting African Americans contained advertisements that were more likely to be for “fast food, candy, soda or meat and were less likely to be for cereals, grains and pasta, fruits and vegetables, dessert or alcohol,” compared to programs aimed at a general market (p. 191). The authors go on to argue that “one barrier to reducing calorie consumption may be the intense marketing by producers of less healthful foods (e.g., candy, soda) and insufficient counter-marketing of healthful foods” (p. 191).

Similar findings exist for magazine advertising content. Campo and Mastin (2007) found that much of the advertising content in *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *Jet* magazines over a 21-year period focused on high-calorie, low-nutrition products. Along the same lines, Kean and Prividera (2007) found that the three most advertised products in *Essence* in 2004 were individual food items (e.g., crackers, pasta), non-alcoholic beverages, and fast food, with the latter making up almost 15% of ads. Additionally, although many advertisements were for fast food, the messages often touted the nutritional benefits of an item such as the “low-fat” or “high-fiber” content of the product as well as its pleasing taste. Pratt and Pratt (1996) performed a content analysis of food, beverage, and nutritional advertisements in *Essence* and *Ebony* magazines, aimed at African American women, and the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, aimed at the general female population. They found that African American magazines contained a much higher percentage of alcohol or alcohol-related advertisements, which “accounted for at least 47% of the total number of advertisements, by product category,” whereas the “*Ladies’ Home Journal* had its lowest number of advertisements in that category” (p. 515). Additionally, Pratt and Pratt found that advertisements on “weight control” received minimal attention in African American oriented magazines but received more attention in magazines aimed at the general female population.

Regarding editorial content, Campo and Mastin (2007) compared weight stories in *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *Jet* over a 21-year period to articles in mainstream women’s magazines, and found that the magazines aimed at African Americans often focused on “fad diets.” The authors argued that, “many of the strategies presented to mainstream audiences would be important to suggest to African American audiences, such as eating smaller portions, obtaining a doctor’s supervision, and removing cues that trigger eating” (p. 237). In another study examining advertising and editorial content in African-American women’s magazines, Mastin and Campo (2006) found that contradictory messages were presented on the topic of excessive weight between 1984 and 2003, with articles promoting individual-level strategies

for a “balanced diet” and “physical activity” and advertisements in the same magazines marketing unhealthy foods. Additionally, Mastin and Campo (2006) found that none of the articles addressed “the availability or affordability of fresh fruits and vegetables or safe locations to engage in physical activities” (p. 280). This suggests that the positive influence of media coverage may be impaired by inconsistent messages and a failure to recognize group or community level solutions in tandem with individual efforts.

Omonuwa and Bradford (2001) examined how informative White and African-American oriented magazine outlets were regarding health, medical conditions, and treatments. The authors found that African American oriented magazines focused more on hair styles, fashion, and romantic relationships whereas White oriented magazines had more descriptive articles on health issues and advertisements.

Further research has considered the link between media exposure and food consumption. In a recent survey analysis of African American women, Kean, Prividera, Boyce, and Curry (2012) found that unhealthy food consumption was positively associated with total television viewing time yet the amount of television news viewing was “positively associated with healthy food consumption” (p. 210). Moreover, Kean et al. (2012) found that magazine reading was also positively associated with the consumption of healthy foods. They argue that reading may allow individuals to reflect more on message meaning and the strength of arguments thus enhancing one’s decision making on healthy choices.

We are interested specifically in editorial content in magazines targeting African American women because women are seeking information on health in these venues and magazines are covering health topics (Barnett, 2006; Lumpkins, Cameron, & Frisby, 2012; Moyer et al., 2001). News content found in magazines may have important and influential messages about food consumption, health, weight, and physical activity for African American women.

Method

To better understand the representation of health, fitness, and weight for African Americans, we chose two of the leading magazines for African American audiences: *Ebony* and *Essence*. *Ebony*, part of the Johnson Publishing Company, maintains its history of being Black owned. *Essence* is no longer under African American ownership after being purchased by Time, Inc., in 2005. *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines are among the top-rated lifestyle magazines read by African American women, and were selected for their “large circulation and longevity” (Campo & Mastin, 2007, p. 233). Monthly circulation averages for *Essence* and *Ebony* are more than 1 million (Alliance for Audited Media, 2013) and their respective websites argue that they reach about 8.5 million and nearly 11 million readers respectively (www.ebony.com; www.essence.com). Woodward and Mastin (2005) argue that:

Essence had become a part of Black life long before it was stated firmly what *Essence* meant to Black women. *Essence* continues to give Black women varied

images of themselves to look at and read about, images that appear only rarely in mainstream White publication, if at all. (pp. 264-265)

Ebony's media kit states that it is the “magazine of record for the African-American community” (p. 4).

Our choice of a two-year period for data collection served two purposes. First, it assured a sufficient number of articles for analysis. Second, it provided a time-span long enough to reveal consistent patterns throughout the yearly cycle of topics (e.g., getting ready for summer, holiday eating, and weight). Furthermore, we chose 2008 and 2009 to provide a five-year gap between our research and the Mastin and Campo (2006) study. Our goal was to identify potential changes in media content aimed at African-American women, in the same way Gearhart, Craig, and Steed's (2011) research pinpointed changes in the media coverage of obesity from 1995 to 2009.

To develop the data set, the researchers culled every 2008 and 2009 issue of each magazine, looking for articles mentioning excessive weight, weight loss, obesity/being overweight, food and/or beverage consumption, unhealthy/healthy eating and/or foods, and exercise/fitness. Articles were selected if they were at least one page in length and the key terms/topics listed above appeared in the title or in a bulleted list, were highlighted or in a box, or appeared in larger text or if key terms/topics appear in at least 20% of paragraphs. If a photograph covered a portion of the text on a page, it was included in our study as meeting the one-page requirement. This yielded a total of 106 articles (54 in *Ebony* and 52 in *Essence*).

Although we were interested in exploring media content aimed at a particular racial group, we did not begin with the assumption that race would be an overt reference point or that it would a priori feature certain topics or framings. Such caution is warranted given that Hazell and Clarke (2008) found in their research of Black oriented magazines, that although many positive messages were sent in ads, they did contain elements of racism and stereotyping that must be problematized. Thus, we observed recurring images, patterns, and language to identify and describe common themes that emerged in the articles. “Themes are the recurring typical theses” that appear throughout the texts (Altheide, 1996, p. 31).

Our procedures for revealing themes were consistent with the “constant comparative method” (Lindlof, 1995, p. 222). Thematic elements were reviewed and compared across articles and the intersections among them were identified to articulate the media frame. This qualitative approach then is systematic but not rigid (Altheide, 1996). In addition, two important aspects of this method are that “it specifies the means by which theory grounded in the relationships among data emerges through the management of coding (hence, grounded theory), and it shows explicitly how to code and conceptualize as field data keep flowing in” (Lindlof, 1995, pp. 222-223). It is through this approach that we developed themes that comprised the media frame for stories of health, fitness, and weight in *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines.

***Ebony* and *Essence*: Framing African-American Women's Health**

Through our analysis, four themes emerged from our data: race and identity, wellness, faith, and connection. Race and identity are featured as a connecting fabric that forms the background for the experiences of story subjects and readers. It features prominently as a lens for viewing health and health experiences. Wellness connects the multiple parts of health, fitness, and image by creating a holistic and racially filtered view of what is “healthy.” Faith is a foundation on which wellness can be built and defines race, spirituality, and connection. Connection features the importance of those links among the individual, family, and community. Together, the themes create a coherent and appealing frame for the presentation and understanding of health, weight, and fitness in the African-American community.

Race and Identity

Race readily emerged as a significant dimension of story framing. Stories regularly referred to being African American or Black in the context of the story topic (e.g., “African-American health”, “a Black health” problem). A noteworthy comparison can be made with general readership magazines. It is not uncommon to mark specific groups that are a subset or fall outside of the primary readership (e.g., elderly, women, Latinos, cancer survivors). Such labeling parses a diverse audience and highlights to whom the article is most relevant. However, in *Ebony* and *Essence* the primary audience *is* the marked audience. By highlighting “Blackness,” it is a reminder that this readership is a specific group faced with the same health concerns. Readers are not separate from the mainstream and “different.” Instead, they are their own mainstream and share lived experiences that are directly related to race.

The importance of racial identity is often evoked in comparison with non-Blacks. In particular, White females were often used as a discursive comparison point for the condition of African-American women's health. For example, in the *Essence* September 2008 article, “The State of BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH”, Lynya Floyd writes: “Black women still tend to have the highest death rates from a wide range of diseases, including breast cancer and stroke. They still have the shortest life span compared with their White counterparts” (Floyd, p. 188). Similarly, in *Ebony*, “30 percent more Black [people are] dying of heart disease than Whites in America” (Monroe, 2008, p. 142). Finally, in “Feed the soul & spirit, not just the body,” in the March 2009 issue of *Ebony*, tennis star Zina Garrison writes: “[E]ating disorders do not just affect White girls and women. All of us are susceptible” (p. 34). This quote was pulled out and displayed in large font in the center of the article under an image of the author. The thematic significance of race was carried beyond marking and contrasting. The theme also developed in terms of identity and one's relationship with health.

African Americans are predisposed to many health issues in terms of frequency and severity. For example, African Americans have higher rates of heart disease, overweight and obesity, diabetes, and premature birth (Office of Women's Health, 2013), as well as less access to healthcare and differential treatment in the health-care system relative to their non-

African-American counterparts (Van Ryn & Burke, 2000). Health is clearly presented in these magazines as a raced experience. For example, Davis (2009) writes: “African-American women tend to have a higher average body weight than women of other groups” (p. 171). Alternatively, Johnson (2008) states in an *Essence* article “just being African-American is a risk factor for diabetes” (p. 67). The connection among readers is not simply health but health and race. Moreover, it is a connection of health and race, where race has altered the dynamic of the health issue (e.g., increased incidence of many health problems).

Common health topics in the magazines were heart disease and diabetes—diseases commonly connected to excessive weight. As stated in *Ebony*: “Yes, we know that heart disease is the leading cause of death among African-Americans, with 30 percent more Blacks dying of heart disease than Whites in America” (Monroe, 2008, p. 142). The article “The Rising Problem of High Blood Pressure in Children” focused specifically on African-American children’s health (Price, 2008). In the February 2008 issue of *Ebony*, an article titled “The Wake-Up Call” provided these facts: “[O]ne in three women will die from heart disease.... African-American women are even more at risk” (Coles, p. 56). The connection of race to health was frequently pointed and urgent, as stated in *Ebony*: “The numbers are paralyzing—almost 80 percent of our women are overweight, nearly 70 percent of our men, 25 percent of our little girls and 18 percent of our boys” (House Call, 2008, p. 51). The cover of the September 2009 *Essence* features a story on the “6 Health Threats Black Women Can’t Ignore.” Numerous passages in articles highlighted the connection of race to health risk. For example, in an *Essence* November 2009 article, “Secrets to beating Diabetes,” the author writes: “[W]e are especially vulnerable to this disease because of our size.... African-American women tend to have a higher average body weight than women of other groups” (p. 171). Bennett (2008) alerts the *Ebony* reader that “African American women have the highest premature birth and infant mortality rates of all racial groups” (p. 138).

Articles also used race to provide context for readers. For example: “If you’re one of the up to 80 percent of African-Americans who are lactose-intolerant” (Johnson, 2008, p. 66). Later, the article cautioned readers: “be on the lookout for fibroids; they are commonly found in African-American women in their thirties” (p. 67). In that sense, issues of health were portrayed as issues of African-American health.

The unified racial identity was also directly conveyed in the use of “brothers and sisters” to refer to all members of the African-American community. For example, Dr. Ian Smith, *Ebony/Jet* weight loss challenge director, stated: “We are killing ourselves ... thousands of our Brothers and Sisters are dying every day from illnesses such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke ... illnesses that are largely preventable” (Smith, July 2008, p. 126). The cover of *Essence* in July 2008 featured the story “I Lost 150 Pounds: How One Sister Lost Half Her Size.” The article further elaborated on the issues of race and health (Sansone, 2008). Ultimately, health was framed as a critical issue to—and one that can be addressed through—the African American community.

Race, then, is defined as a frame for both understanding health issues that are unique to African-Americans and a way to identify health risks common to African-Americans. The sense of community and similarity are further enriched by the selection of Black experts, celebrities, and readers photographed for and discussed in the stories. In the *Essence* November 2008 article “Starting Over,” television talk show host Star Jones talks about bypass surgery for weight reduction and her health. *Ebony*’s March 2009 issue contains an article titled, “In the K.N.O.W. about Diabetes: *American Idol*’s Randy Jackson tells how he changed his lifestyle” (p. 76). The September 2008 *Essence* article “The State of BLACK WOMEN’S HEALTH” urges readers to “get the essential health news you need to know, from a source you can trust: our virtual roundtable of top-notch Black doctors, all experts in their fields ... their insight and advice can save your life” (p. 186). The images reinforce the text by providing photos of African American physicians in scrubs and lab coats. Other experts include nutritionists and personal trainers. In an *Essence* August 2008 article “The Sexy Butt Workout,” famous personal trainer Donna Richardson Joyner provides an exercise regimen focusing on how to get a sexy butt. The text is accompanied by multiple images of Joyner completing the workout routine. Overall, in these articles few non-Black experts were featured, and non-Black celebrities were almost non-existent. This reinforces the notion that these health and wellness issues are indeed uniquely Black issues and demand a specific kind of attention and heightened awareness that may not be met via other media products.

Although the focus on race heightened awareness of African American’s health risks, such information has come with some of its own troublesome consequences. Numerous articles pointed to a widespread belief held by African Americans that their health issues are inescapable. As noted by Dr. Ian Smith in *Ebony*: “African-Americans are too often resigned to a fate of ill health and its consequences” (Welteroth, 2009, p. 105). Similarly, as noted by Dr. Jennifer Mieres in *Essence*, some health problems are ubiquitous: “A typical woman in our community knows so many others in her circle who have diabetes that she may believe developing it herself is unavoidable” (Floyd, 2008). The community message is loud and clear, but the individual’s choice of how to respond to the message may not always be made wisely. To that end, numerous articles encourage readers to be proactive about family health history, “getting checked,” and “talking with your doctor.”

In short, the Black community is constructed as a unique community defined by its heritage, genetics, and experiences. Moreover, how African-Americans deal with the health issues in their community has its own unique manifestation.

Wellness

Wellness itself is a multidimensional construct encompassing the physical, emotional, mental, and social. A recurring health message in our data was to “change your lifestyle.” The benefits of doing so are potentially profound, as noted in *Ebony*: “Sticking to a fitness plan may not only add years to your life, it may also help you enjoy them even more” (Welteroth, 2009, p. 106). A September 2009 *Ebony* article, titled “Shaping up at any age,” suggests:

“Great health is where it all begins. Getting healthy and being in shape starts wherever you are” (Christian, p. 124). The holistic nature of wellbeing is not lost on Melissa Hall, who states, “Getting your nails done, expensive bags, and hairstylings are temporary.... A healthy life is forever” (Saafir, 2008, p. 166). Even the articles intensely focused on weight addressed the multiple aspects of being healthy. The *Ebony* May 2008 issue includes the article “Give FLAB the BOOT: Intense fitness camps push body beyond its limits,” which provides details on how to lose weight quickly and in a healthy way through group exercise (Halloway, 2008).

Appearance itself was presented as a component of wellness, and discussed particularly in articles on fitness. Exceptionally fit bodies were shown in revealing clothing to illustrate the effects of the workouts and showcase the trainers themselves as paragons of fitness. Consistent with the findings of Kean and Prividera (2007), appearance was less central than in mainstream magazine outlets. The process of losing weight, getting healthy, and even getting physically fit and attractive were regularly framed as part of overall health and wellness. Appearance was thus not overlooked, but rather portrayed as a dimension of wellness, which enhances self-esteem and health.

For example, in an article titled “Your sexy shape-up guide” published in *Essence* July 2009, the reader is offered ideas for “[e]ating your way to more energy and a slimmer silhouette” and told to “[g]et ready to pull on that baby tee or slip on that miniskirt. Our expert advice will get you a hot body—and more energy—in no time” (Bender, p. 123). The article discussed providing the body with proper nutrients via balanced eating to support both fitness and energy. Improved appearance was a part of, rather than a draw to, weight loss or exercise.

Furthermore, the character of appearance was uniquely African American. For example, in *Essence*, Buchanan (2008) discusses becoming healthy while remaining a “plus-size sister.” Even articles that did not center on those who were “plus-size” still featured women losing weight who were not model-thin. Women of a variety of sizes and shapes were regularly featured as exemplars of wellness. Even the process of exercising was framed as a well experience. For example, in *Essence*, Saafir (2008) states: “[S]weating in the gym isn’t an excuse to be frumpy. Treating the treadmill like a runway made [Linda] Tyler feel as good as she looked” (p. 166).

The importance of the uniquely Black appearance and physical attributes was highlighted repeatedly, particularly those centered on fitness. In a fitness article section titled “Bootylicious,” the author states: “let’s face it, Black women prize their butts, and they are prized for their butts” (Perkins, 2008, p. 150). Such prizing offers motivation to exercise and serves as a source of self-esteem. This is even more developed in articles that discuss “sexiness.” Being sexy is portrayed as a state of mind, both about appearance and attitude, and it is part of the well experience. “Your Sexy Shape-Up Guide” notes how “you will get a hot body—and more energy—in no time” (Bender, 2009, p. 123). Other articles suggested

being “slimmer” and featuring “must flaunt” body parts. A healthy and racially valued body image was at the center of an article titled “The curvy girl’s guide to beating holiday weight gain” (Bender, 2009). The getting (and staying) fit message is framed as being about health, pride in living well, and a lesson in self-respect.

Explicit racial and cultural references to wellness were made in discussions of eating habits as well. Consumption of food and specific foods were associated with culture. Many of these foods were singled out by authors as problem spots for African American health: “fried chicken,” “ham hocks,” and other traditionally prepared meals. Quantity was an issue as well. Many articles noted the role of family gatherings and holidays as situations in which foods were not only risky, but also consumed to excess. For example the *Ebony* December 2008 article titled “Eat, drink and be merry,” states: “with all of that joy and the abundance of food, this is the most dangerous time of the year for gaining more weight, which is the cause of some of the most serious health conditions in the Black community” (p. 51). Many articles called out readers for their unhealthy cultural practices and reminded them: being Black is not just a biological trait—it is a lifestyle as well. Alternatives were featured prominently in images: plates of fresh fruit and vegetables, lean entrées, and modest portions. Such visuals bring home the wellness message.

Faith

Spirituality and religious beliefs were portrayed as a significant component of health and wellness. For example, “Happy and Healthy: Be the woman God wants you to be,” is the message on the November 2008 cover of *Essence*. Inside, the article announces in bold letters: “YES, you can!” (McIntosh, 2008). The article is noteworthy for focusing on the holistic social-emotional-spiritual “wellness,” and firmly connecting it to the physical body. The multidimensional construction of wellness emerges in the first paragraph, which chronicles a woman who set goals “to lose 80 pounds, win a national beauty pageant, and serve as a member of Congress” (McIntosh, 2008, p. 141). By the writing of the article, she had met her weight and beauty pageant goals, and had taken numerous steps to foster her dreams of political office. Faith features prominently in this article as integral to reaching health and wellness goals. Pastor Henry Fernandez notes: “If God has put something on your heart to do, you can do it” (McIntosh, 2008, p. 141). Physical and spiritual wellbeing are also connected in “Divine intervention,” an article about a 24-year-old woman who was not motivated to change her lifestyle by her size-20 jeans or by her doctor putting her on hypertension medication one afternoon. However, she was motivated two weeks later by a church sermon. The material effects of her motivation are summed up in the final sentence of the article “Now a size 8, Gray recently bought her very first bathing suit” (Cox-Cordova, 2009, p. 126).

Faith is a driving force for the individual journey of wellness. When addressing personal challenges, McIntosh states in *Essence* that “the answer should come from your spirit” (2008, p. 143). Even when faced with mental health challenges, the wellness of the

individual is situated in empowerment: “admitting that you’re depressed doesn’t mean you’re not strong” (Johnson, 2008, p. 68). In another article, Dr. Janet Taylor reminds readers that “depression is not a sign of weakness or that you’ve done something wrong or that you didn’t pray hard enough” (Floyd, 2008, p. 192).

The intersection of spirituality and wellness also features prominently in the type of fitness programs portrayed by the magazine. In “Unity for Yoga,” Porschla Coleman describes the style she teaches as “very contemporary. It’s very much about the workout and also the spirit, the musicality and letting go” (Welteroth, 2009 p. 117). Yoga, a holistic approach to health and the self (mind, body, and spirit), characterizes the recurrence of wellness as a theme throughout the articles we examined. In “The Body Beautiful” of *Essence* a section is dedicated to the “AJ Zone” program, which celebrity Gabrielle Union characterizes as “part cardio and weights, part talk therapy and part Bible study” (Brown & Habtezhgi, 2008, p. 101). *Ebony*’s 2008 October issue profiles nine weight-loss challenge participants, several of whom discuss God’s grace (Smith, 2008). An article titled “Second time around” in the August 2009 issue of *Essence*, offers the story of a woman whose inspiration came from a “motivational poster that not only held scripture passages but also her ‘before’ picture and a photo of Tyra Banks in a bikini” (Jordan, 2009, p. 134).

Further, in the *Ebony* March 2008 article, “Honor your temple: Work off pounds while praising your higher power,” the reader is presented with an image of people holding hands, heads bowed (Halloway, 2008). The story profiles a hard-working, well-paid man, who suddenly became ill due to poor diet, stress, and lack of exercise. To address his health, a higher power led him to a woman who runs a faith-based, 12-step program that “combines meditation, simple diet changes and an easy exercise regimen to flex physical and spiritual muscles” (Halloway, 2008, p. 166). To achieve happiness and wellness, one should “Go to church—Any church” (Burford, 2008, p. 107). Clearly, the role of spiritual communities and one’s faith were an important part of constructing messages about achieving good health. So, too, were connections to one’s family, friends, and, of course, one’s cultural community.

Connection

Our last theme characterized the role of community in driving and supporting positive health outcomes. Although the foci of most articles were on suggestions about what to eat and how to exercise, these were often situated within the framework of support from family, friends, and a spiritual-cultural community. Dr. Janet Taylor suggests: “Tell people the goal and enlist their support with changing your behavior” (Floyd, 2008, p. 192). In articles titled “I walked off the weight” (Buchanan, 2008) and “Fighting breast cancer” (Meyer, 2009), *Essence* encourages readers to involve a significant other in a walking regimen. As a method for beating stress eating, another story suggests: “Post your food fixation as a Facebook update or Tweet, and you’ll have the bonus of emotional support from friends” (Jordan, 2009, p. 184). Such support was particularly important at times when food was central to activities such as holidays. “After dinner, our family takes a walk to see the festive

sights. This keeps everyone mobile, allowing our bodies to burn off those excess holiday calories” (Bender, 2009, p. 158). Another tip was the following: “Skate the day away. Skip the holiday happy hour and opt for an active afternoon of ice skating or yoga with your girls.... This will give you that sense of togetherness without the fatty food” (Bender, 2009, p. 159). Even material support was presented as part of one’s connection to others. For example, Sharell Grey encouraged friends and family to buy fitness-related gifts for the holidays (Cox-Cordova, 2009).

Ebony also focused on community as an important theme. In “BURN OFF THE baby fat,” readers are presented with the image of a mom working out while holding her baby, and another photo of a mom and a dad with their baby, running and stretching (Henderson, 2009). The article offers ideas for families working out together to get rid of baby weight that both mom and dad may have gained: “As many couples experience the joys of childbirth and parenting together, getting fit for the challenge has become a family affair now more than ever” (Henderson, 2009, p. 126). Images of a family cooking and exercising accompany the text. Similarly, in the *Ebony/Jet* Weight Loss Challenge series in July, the participants are almost always pictured with friends and family, involved in food preparation or sports (Smith, 2008).

A recurrent discussion on being healthy was a sense of loyalty to others. Family and friends were cited as sources of support and motivation to get well. In addition, once people reached their goals, they often expressed their achievement in terms of doing it for family or going forth and spreading the good will toward others. In this sense, loyalty to family and community became a significant component of the wellness messages. One could receive assistance and support, but one was also acting, or would subsequently act, for the wellbeing of those around her or him.

In a general sense, loyalty is about working in a team to reach a goal. Yet, the depth of the “team” goes beyond actions at the gym or the grocery store. It is frequently expressed as a commitment to intimate partners or family. Addressing one’s health concerns is done “together.” As noted by Damien Gurganious in his mutual fitness program with his significant other, “we’re not complaining about being overweight. We’re ready to celebrate our lives together. What better way to do that than lose weight?” (Cole, 2009, p. 98). Nicole Brewer follows later in the same article [of her partnership with Damien]: “I want to have a baby. We want to build a life together. This is about our future” (Cole, 2009, p. 103). The loyalty is a two-way connection—as support pours in, a sense of reciprocation takes over. An article in the October issue of *Ebony* stated: “There was a point when I wanted to quit, but I couldn’t because people are supporting me and I can’t let them down (Smith, 2008, p. 148). Being well was framed as an obligation to young children, spouses, and family. C. Simone Rivers framed her health transformation in *Essence* as “saving my life” because “the fear of dying before seeing my children grow up frightened me into changing my lifestyle, not just losing weight (Spradley, 2008, p. 124). There is a strong sense of personal obligation to others and a strong sense of commitment from others in the personal stories examined. Such

obligation is consistent with a community that is defined by tight family bonds as well as a strong cultural and spiritual connection among those sharing that community.

Even when people were not speaking of their own support systems, the experts frequently noted that the most successful people had support in meeting their health goals. For example, Dr. Ian Smith notes: “those who lose the most weight and keep it off in medical studies are those who have some type of support system” (Welteroth, 2009, p. 105).

Not only are family members a source of support in the gym and at the dinner table, but the meaning of family is also redefined in some of the content. For example, an article on the Tapas yoga workout observed that part of the class activity is to “gather as family.” In the words of Porschla Coleman, “yoga is not a competition ... you go in and do what you can do ... the goal is to keep going” (Welteroth, 2009, p. 118). And the class is a support group for doing exactly that.

In many articles, loyalty to community members extends far beyond one’s family room or class location. Many of those profiled (fitness experts and participants) expressed their desire to share successes and “spread the word” with family, others who suffered from similar ailments or conditions, and the community in general. Perhaps the greatest extension of community comes from Kim Coles, in her story about weight loss and health. She speaks directly to the reader about wellness: “I want a long, prosperous, amazing life, and I want you to have one too” (Coles, 2008, p. 56). Clearly, the collectivistic roles played by family, friends, and/or spiritual communities were a central part of constructing messages on achieving good health.

Discussion

Combine, the interconnected themes of race and identity, wellness, faith, and community offer a coherent health communication framework. Each theme has elements of some of the others, and they work as a unified lens for understanding African-American health. Furthermore, the images and stories embrace beliefs about what it is to be African-American and illustrate the centrality of health and wellness. The African-American reader can be well, can be fit, and does not have to compromise her/his beliefs or identity to do so.

Message construction is critically important to understanding and reaching audiences. For a publication to maintain credibility and for an article to capture the reader, the narrative must be coherent and resonant. Well-constructed frames achieve this goal. This study outlined a framework for how the topics of excessive weight, body image, health, and fitness were consistently discussed in *Essence* and *Ebony* during 2008 and 2009. First and foremost, these outlets addressed the issue from the perspective of African-American women and sent the message that race matters. Thus, the content was replete with images and references connected specifically to the African-American community. To draw from social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), it is indeed prudent for a publication targeting African American-women to use models and experts to whom readers can relate. Although race is

certainly not the only characteristic with which people identify, framing magazine content using African-American sources and images is more likely to encourage African-American women to engage in the modeled/recommended behavior.

Our analysis also showed that the weight-health relationship was framed as a critical issue for the African-American community. This was evident in articles about weight loss, about health problems, and about fitness and exercise. Although there were images associated with appearance (before and after photos) and fitness articles that brought up appearance as a motivator for weight loss, the primary theme was still wellness. It is important to note that perceptions of “attractiveness” may vary by culture/race. Gore (1999) argued that because of the relationship between cultural identity and weight, African American women may respond differently to messages about weight than their Caucasian counterparts, and may prefer messages that link weight to health, as opposed to a more mainstream notion that focuses on thinness as the relevant outcome measure.

Compared to Campo and Mastin’s (2007) findings, we saw a dramatic increase in numbers of weight-related articles in our sample. While they found 110 articles in *Ebony* and *Essence* on the subject of excessive weight between 1984 and 2004, our sample had 69 articles on the subject of excessive weight and weight loss (not including fitness articles) in just two years. This could indicate that the topic of excessive weight is receiving more attention than in previous decades. However, of note is the decrease in coverage in 2009. In our study, there were 66 articles meeting the selection criteria in 2008 and only 40 in 2009. Future research should be conducted to determine whether this is a trend, possibly reflecting a view of the topic of excessive weight as old news. This is particularly problematic from the standpoint of agenda setting; less coverage may minimize African-American women’s perceptions of excessive weight as a salient public health issue.

Additionally, many of the articles frame race as risk. Such framing does function to heighten the reader’s awareness of health risks as related to group membership. Over and over, dramatic personal stories told readers how weight loss saved someone’s life. Excessive weight was consistently framed as having dangerous and deadly consequences, emphasizing solutions for dealing with this public health issue. Increasing perceptions of risk has been argued to promote adoption of healthier behaviors, according to theoretical models such as the health belief model (Janz & Becker, 1984). Therefore, one could assume that focusing on risk relative to membership in a racial group would motivate one to behave in the advocated behavior—in this case maintaining a healthy weight. However, there is some contradictory research here. Nicholson et al. (2008) discuss the unintended effects of focusing on disparities in their research on colon cancer information. The authors presented African American males with mock news stories that either focused on disparities or focused on progress. The authors found that those who were exposed to the disparity messages had more negative emotional reactions to the materials and reported they were less likely to want to be screened for colorectal cancer as compared to those receiving the stories about progress in the area. Thus, using risk as a motivator may not always be a successful strategy, and has been

known to backfire when messages are presented within the context of health disparities. It is important to be aware of how one's audience might respond to these persuasive tools.

We also found it particularly beneficial that spirituality was a central part of health message construction in the magazines examined. Research indicates that African Americans are more likely to have a spiritual component to their lives and more likely to turn to their religion or spiritual program for support than White Americans (Chatters, Taylor, Bullard & Jackson, 2009). Chatters and colleagues found that African Americans were more likely to be official members of a congregation, participate in church activities and to pray—a pattern found in similar investigations for more than 30 years. There is evidence that those who participate in organized religion or have pro-religious orientations are more likely to engage in positive health behaviors (Turner-Musa & Wilson, 2006). Turner-Musa and Wilson (2006) explain that African Americans, in particular, use support from family, friends and church in developing positive health behaviors. In fact, health promotion programs have often made connections with community religious organizations to help share messages about healthy practices (Markens, Fox, Taub, & Gilbert, 2002).

Regarding support from others, Campo and Mastin (2007) argue that collectivist strategies to weight loss and health may be more likely than individualized strategies to appeal to African American women. Our analysis showed that faith, family, and friends were frequently used to situate weight concerns. The personal narratives especially provided additional support that spirituality and family were important components of addressing the topic of excessive weight in the African American community. This indicates that outlets are following the recommendations of previous research (Mastin & Campo, 2006), in focusing on societal/community level solutions to weight problems.

Overall, this framing analysis revealed that the stories examined did address the significant public health issue of excessive weight in the African American community. As Kean et al. (2012) found in their survey research, African American women who read news stories are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors. This research shows specifically how two magazine outlets framed their numerous—and positive—health messages toward African American women.

Practical Implications

This research may serve as a starting place for health message design. Instead of including only simple and fact-based informational materials in a health behavior campaign, communication specialists should consider using strategies employed in the popular media. One of the most significant implications of this research is that health messages should work with a cultural understanding rather than focus on health information, absent such an understanding. Integrating what is known about health and how a population frames and understands this information is invaluable in effecting change in that population of readers. In short, linguistic tropes, audience appeals, and striking visuals are noticed, but in the absence of a culturally relevant frame, they may not reach their full potential for change.

Thus, we should continue to meet target audiences where we believe they will be open to messages about health and wellness. Such efforts may include using churches and other social venues. However, they should also involve informed health care providers equipped with appropriate talking points and ways to frame health information. Moreover, there should be continued use of popular media outlets that contain culturally framed messages. In addition, it is important to use the voices with whom the target audience can relate (i.e., who share the audience's values and not simply a cultural identity). Well-chosen African American physicians and celebrities may be able to deliver a message that more clearly connects with the audience as opposed to those who may seem less relatable and/or credible to the audience. This means that we need to develop our interpersonal communication strategies in tandem with media strategies. Materials and talking points should emphasize issues of spirituality, group support, and wellness.

Finally, knowing the ways in which members of a particular audience may view their own appearance goals can impact message design. It would be inaccurate to assume that all audience members are interested in meeting the thin ideal promoted by most media. As our research indicates, on the topic of weight and food consumption, the message should focus less on weight or clothing size as specific numbers and more on the relationships among weight, food consumption, and health. It is important to also be aware of what not to emphasize. Campaign planners and writers of content must understand the impact of visual elements and be aware of the risk of possible unintended consequences—for example, when there is an inconsistency between text and images (see Nicholson et. al, 2008; Mastin & Campo, 2006).

The findings of this study would be beneficial not only to communication professionals constructing health messages, but also to journalists who cover such topics for publications that target or reach the African-American community. Previous research indicates that mainstream media outlets often do not effectively address issues relating to that population; yet, they have been found to be a source of health information for many women (Barnett, 2006; Campo & Mastin, 2007; Hendersen & Kelly, 2005; Kean & Prividera, 2007; Lumpkins, Cameron, & Frisby, 2012; Mastin & Campo, 2006; Moyer et al., 2001). Our findings support previous research that framing weight, food, and fitness/exercise as wellness issues is likely to resonate with African-American women, and that using opinion leaders within the community, including spiritual leaders, may affect positive change (Markens, Fox, Taub & Gilbert, 2002; Turner-Musa & Wilson, 2006). Practitioners must remember that their audiences are not monolithic rational receivers, but have unique perspectives, needs, and motivations that will influence the relative success of any given message.

Ultimately, the findings of this study are not just an analysis of messages about weight in African-American magazines aimed at African-American women, but also a reminder why the one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Good campaign development

requires doing the front-end work to understand the perspectives and needs of the chosen audiences.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

We acknowledge that our analysis did not address the corpus of magazines aimed at African-American women, and recognize that although *Ebony* and *Essence* are popular, they do not speak to all African-American women. Other media outlets are worthy of exploration.

Furthermore, we did not focus on the actual dietary and physical activity recommendations in the articles. The next step in our research will be to review these recommendations with the help of a panel of experts to investigate the validity of the recommendations made in these articles. Additionally, focus groups and in-depth interviews could provide information about how women use these magazines and their content on weight and health.

Again, in campaign design, it is important to know to what and how our audience members respond. Primary and secondary research needs to continue to focus on understanding the motivations of individuals and groups and their needs. Community partnerships can also be an important part of this equation. By involving local organizations in our efforts, we are likely to create more meaningful messages that we can share with individuals through both mediated and interpersonal communication channels.

Conclusion

Although we recognize that the magazines reviewed here are providing information and entertainment rather than structuring a persuasive campaign, as media researchers we must be aware of the possible consequences to the way in which a topic is framed. This study shows that examining magazine messages intended for African-American women is particularly important for understanding and enhancing communication strategies that promote healthy weight and living.

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