



# Weight-Relevant Messages in Magazines Read by African American Youth: A Content Analysis

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## Abstract

Obesity is a serious health issue for American youth – especially youth from ethnic and racial minorities (CDC, 2014). Scholars have suggested media put youth at risk for obesity-related issues (Strasburger, 2011). Research about media influence on health outcomes has relied on self-reporting of both media use and health behaviors. However, self-reports have limited validity (Stone et al., 1999).

Youth learn about health through many media, but they might not be able to name health information sources (DeAndrea et al., 2012). Studies show teens learn sexual health behaviors from magazines, TV, and music more than from parents or school (Brown, 2001) and they learn smoking behaviors from commercial films (Dalton et al., 2003; Sargent et al., 2001; Sargent et al., 2005). However, no research to date has examined weight-related content in entertainment media used by children of racial minorities. It is the focus of our study.

We present a content analysis of weight-related messages in magazines read by African American youth. We assess all information related to eating and physical activity in October 2008 and May 2009 issues of 12 popular titles. Sixteen coders rated more than 32,000 analysis units on more than 2,500 pages. They coded weight-related visual and textual information in editorial and ad content.

We outline trends in content across magazines by genre, reader demographics, and types of health and exercise content included in ads and articles. We underscore the availability of health content in entertainment media, further suggesting self-reports may not provide a clear picture of youths' actual media diets.

## Black Youth Obesity

Black youth overweight and obesity exceeds rates in White, Asian, and Latino populations. Youth-onset Type II diabetes is higher among Black youth than White, Asian, and Latino (CDC, 2014).

**Youth overweight / obesity rates:** 35% Black vs. 28.5% White  
**Youth obesity rates:** 20% Black vs. 17% White  
**Female youth obesity rates:** 25% Black vs. 15% White

## Magazines as Health Resources

Mags are important to kids bc they are “easily-obtained credible sources of information... Short, graphical, easy-to-digest, and immediately relevant” (Skinner, Biscope, Poland & Goldberg, 2003).

Girls say magazines rank just behind friends as a primary source for lifestyle information (Black and Witherspoon, 2002).

Content targeted to black women less healthy than content aimed at white women (Campo & Mastin, 2007; Mastin & Campo, 2006).

## Research Questions

- **RQ1:** What weight-relevant content is contained in magazines read by African American youth?
- **RQ2:** How much of the weight-relevant information in those magazines promotes healthy attitudes vs. unhealthy attitudes?
- **RQ3:** How does weight-relevant content vary across magazine genres read by African American youth, especially in titles targeted to female readers?

## Research Method

Quantitative content analysis used 16 coders to sum themes in > 2,500 magazine pages. Magazines include October 2008 and May 2009 issues of:

**Children’s:** *WordUp!* and *Nickelodeon*  
**Women’s:** *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence*  
**Music:** *Vibe*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The Source*  
**Sports:** *ESPN* and *Sports Illustrated*  
**Gossip:** *US Weekly*

**Analysis Units:**  $N > 32,000$ ; >2,200 relevant  
**In articles:** heds, grafs, captions, and visuals  
**In ads:** heds, logos, copy, and visuals

## Findings

**In response to RQ1,** roughly 7% of magazine content read by African American youth includes weight-relevant messaging. The majority of that content is focused on exercise. Weight-relevant messages are more often promoted in editorial content than in ads.

**In response to RQ2,** roughly two-thirds of all weight-relevant messages are healthy. Unhealthy messages are common in content about fast food and sugary beverages. Ads contain significantly more unhealthy messages than editorial content.

**In response to RQ3,** weight-relevant messages in ads and editorial content vary by magazine genre. Sports magazines contain more weight-relevant messages than other magazines. Fast food content is most common in children’s magazines, and exercise content is most common in sports magazines. Women’s magazines and sports magazines offer healthier messages overall than other genres.

## Findings: Frequency Tables

### SAMPLE-WIDE STATISTICS

	Yes	No
Weight-Relevant Content:	7.2%	92.8%

	Fast Food	Fruits & Veggies	Sugary Drinks	Exercise	Other
% Weight-Relevant Content:	8.0%	5.1%	0.7%	48.9%	37.3%

	Advertisement	Editorial Content
% Weight-Relevant Content	32.6%	67.4%

### CONTENT HEALTHFULNESS

	Healthy	Unhealthy	Unsure
% Weight-Relevant Content	66.4%	21.9%	11.7%

	Fast Food	Fruits & Veggies	Sugary Drinks	Exercise	Other
Healthy	7.2%	85.2%	0.0%	93.2%	42.8%
Unhealthy	84.0%	5.2%	93.8%	2.2%	35.5%
Unsure	8.8%	9.6%	6.2%	4.7%	21.8%

	Advertisement	Editorial Content
Healthy	43.2%	77.5%
Unhealthy	39.3%	13.6%
Unsure	17.5%	8.9%

### CONTENT VARIATION ACROSS GENRES

	Music	Children’s	Women’s	Sports	Gossip
% Weight-Relevant Content:	4%	5.9%	6.9%	17%	4.2%

### Content Type by Genre

	Music	Children’s	Women’s	Sports	Gossip
Fast Food	12.7%	14.7%	7.2%	4.1%	15.0%
Fruits and Veggies	1.8%	12.4%	8.4%	1.8%	15.0%
Sugary Drinks	1.3%	1.1%	0.6%	0.4%	0.0%
Exercise	37.9%	29.4%	21.4%	82.0%	12.0%
Other	46.3%	42.4%	62.4%	11.7%	58.0%

### Healthfulness (Coder’s Point of View) by Genre

	Music	Children’s	Women’s	Sports	Gossip
Healthy	41.0%	45.2%	65.6%	85.4%	54.0%
Unhealthy	43.0%	44.6%	17.5%	7.9%	40.0%
Unsure	16.0%	10.2%	16.9%	6.7%	6.0%

### Portrayal of Healthfulness (Creator’s Point of View) by Genre

	Music	Children’s	Women’s	Sports	Gossip
Positive Portrayal	57.0%	49.7%	61.9%	46.2%	69.0%
Negative Portrayal	4.8%	5.1%	2.3%	6.8%	11.0%
Neutral Portrayal	38.2%	45.2%	35.8%	47.0%	20.0%

## Conclusions & Recommendations

Studies show black women’s magazines promote less healthy messages than white women’s magazines (Campo & Mastin, 2007; Mastin & Campo, 2006). This study does not support those findings. Editors and advertisers may view black females as a weight-loss market.

We recommend future research use content analyses to describe youth media diets rather than rely on self-reported data. Interventionists should consider entertainment media as a possible outlet for youth-targeted health messages.

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