Magic Johnson's Credibility among African-American Men

With little evidence that they are efficacious, several notable media efforts (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control public information campaign, "America Responds to AIDS") have been undertaken to inform African Americans of the need for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)

prevention. Kalichman and colleagues' study[1] demonstrated that an important dimension in prevention, particularly for African-American men in Chicago, was the messenger of a health communication (i.e., the celebrity Magic Johnson). Left unexplained was why Johnson's impact was significant, particularly for African-American men, and whether this influence will function similarly across disparate groups of at-risk African-American men.

Approximately 1 month after Johnson's announcement, we surveyed two groups of heterosexual African-American men with either sex- or drug-related HIV-risk behaviors in Los Angeles County, Calif. Forty-seven indigent men in a shelter (average age, 35 years) and 50 college men (average age, 20 years) responded to a survey assessing Johnson's credibility and his qualifications for being an HIV spokesperson for the African-American community.[2–4]

Both groups saw Johnson as a good spokesperson for the African-American community and were very similar in their ratings of Johnson's attributes that contribute to his credibility (e.g., connection with the African-American community, being an African American, trustworthiness, and heterosexual status; see Table 1). However, the homeless men rated Johnson's HIV-infected status as significantly more important than did college men ($t(95) = 2.96$, $P < .01$). In contrast, students were more likely to rate Johnson's appointment of Whites to his Magic Johnson Foundation board as detrimental to his credibility ($t(95) = 2.85$, $P < .01$). Reasons for this latter finding might be explained by students' higher scores on ethnic-group identification measures: they were significantly more likely than indigent men to perceive that they had been treated unfairly due to their ethnicity ($t(95) = 2.79$, $P < .01$) and to feel that "being Black was more important than being an American" ($t(95) = 2.85$, $P < .01$).

While a celebrity such as Johnson is an effective messenger for some diverse groups of African-American males, it is important to note the attributes that enhance or detract from a messenger's credibility among African-American men.[5] A salient distinction between the two groups we studied is ethnic-group identification, which has been shown to be an important factor in perception of and/or in affiliation with ethnic and nonethnic networks, and in the use of HIV services.[6–8] Our data underscore the importance of the messen-

	Shelter Men (n = 47)		College Men (n = 50)	
Variables Rated	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Agree that Johnson is a "good person to represent and speak on behalf of the African-American community regarding AIDS"	6.3	1.4	5.8	1.6
Johnson's attributes that contribute to his credibility				
Strongly connected to the African-American community	6.5	1.3	6.3	1.2
Infected with HIV disease*	6.4	1.2	5.4	1.9
African American	6.3	1.6	6.6	0.9
Someone you can trust	6.3	1.6	6.2	1.2
"Straight" or heterosexual	6.2	1.8	5.6	2.0
Basketball star	5.4	2.3	5.4	1.7
Financially successful	5.4	2.3	4.6	2.1
TV star	5.3	2.4	5.2	1.8
Johnson's potential detractions from his credibility*				
Appointing a lot of White people to advise him	3.6	2.6	4.9	1.6
Serving on National Commission on AIDS established by President Bush	2.8	2.4	2.9	2.1
Establishing own foundation	2.3	2.1	1.8	1.5
Making TV ads about AIDS sponsored by Converse or Pepsi	2.2	2.0	2.6	1.9

TABLE 1—African-American Men's Ratings of Magic Johnson's Qualifications as an HIV-Prevention Messenger

Note. All variables were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale in which 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree."
*$P < .01$.

ger used in reaching African Americans and in developing HIV-prevention strategies that address the diversity of this community. □

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Acknowledgments

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