

Beauty or Business Queen--

How Young Women Select Media to Reinforce Possible Future Selves

Dynamic management and maintenance of self-concepts shape everyday selective media use (Author, 2015). The present work examines related processes per SESAM with a focus on young women's magazine use. In a prolonged selective-exposure study with seven online sessions, women ($N = 181$, 18-25 years, all Caucasian) completed a baseline session, four sessions with selective browsing of magazine pages (from beauty, parenting, business, and current affairs magazines), and three days later a follow-up. Participants made 16 selections and viewed 80 pages in total. The online application logged magazine content selections and length of exposure. Participants' possible future selves as romantic partner, parent, and professional at baseline affected the extent to which beauty, parenting, and business pages were viewed. In turn, possible future selves as romantic partner and professional were reinforced through selective exposure to beauty and business magazines.

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Media use might be more than a mundane, everyday behavior because it can shape individuals' long-term life visions. The present work aims to demonstrate that media selections and consumption can have tremendously important impacts on individuals' outlook on life. In turn, this outlook on life will shape everyday decisions and the extent to which individuals strive towards certain goals and how they channel their efforts. While scholars have argued that the media may act as a socialization agent (e.g., Bandura, 2001) and may cultivate perceptions of social reality (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002), we take the perspective that media users play an active role in this process because they selectively attend to messages to reinforce self-concepts, and these messages in turn shape media users' behaviors and views. This process is thought to occur not with sudden, drastic shifts but instead as a subtle, ongoing self-management pattern, in which the predominant media effect may come in the form of sustaining certain values, outlooks, and motivations through selective media use for that purpose.

The Selective Exposure Self and Affect Management model (SESAM) has been proposed to conceptualize this view more specifically (Author, in press). The involved psychological processes that actually affect media users have been detailed in this model as social comparison mechanisms (Author, in press). Additionally, we draw on the SESAM argument that specific media selection and use instances should be observed to demonstrate and elucidate the proposed

self-management pattern, ideally across an extended period. The present study is, to our knowledge, the first prolonged selective exposure study in which selective media use was specifically tracked across several days, with a baseline measure session one day before and a post-measure session three days after the four daily selective exposure sessions.

Magazine browsing, which may seem like a particularly casual type of media exposure, serves to illustrate the suggested patterns of self-management according to SESAM in the present empirical study. Women's magazines have been described as one of the most resilient in today's fraught world of publishing (Saner, 2010). Bucking the trend of dropping circulation, most of the women's titles in the top 25 American magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*, *Family Circle*, and *Glamour*, have seen increases in their circulation (Pew Research Center, 2012). With regard to relevant self-concepts and related life outlooks, we utilize young women's anticipations of fulfilling different gender-typed social roles of mother, romantic partner, and (counter-stereotypical) professional. In the following, a brief summary of the SESAM model is offered before hypotheses are derived from a short review of social roles relevant to young women.

The Selective Exposure Self- and Affect Management Model

In essence, the SESAM (Selective Exposure Self- and Affect Management Model) (Author, in press) proposes that media users selectively attend to media messages to regulate their self-views and subsequent affective responses through the social comparisons that occur when attending to media messages. It is a transactional, dynamic process that occurs across time (Früh & Schönbach, 1982; Slater, 2007), where media use motivations determine the media messages individuals select and subsequently how those messages are interpreted. In a reciprocal

relationship, the messages and their effects influence individuals' self-concepts, attitudes, and behaviors in a cumulative process.

The SESAM stresses the idea that the self is a very dynamic, malleable concept, which include traits, demographics, affective and cognitive states and behaviors. The working self (Markus & Wurf, 1987) consists of the self-concepts that are accessible at a particular moment and that in turn shape information processing, affect, and motivations. Therefore, individuals may choose certain types of media messages to activate certain self-concepts. Markus and Wurf (1987) highlighted three motives involved in activation of self-concepts: self-consistency, self-enhancement, and self-actualization. It is through this working self that media users engage in self-inspiration social comparison, comparing one particular dimension of the self to relevant magazine portrayals and aspiring to attain such achievements in the future. These self-concepts are thus linked to the notion of possible future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1987), in which individuals envision themselves in potential future roles that may be desired or feared.

Social comparisons are important processes in media effects and self-management according to the SESAM (but cannot be detailed here due to space limitations). Festinger (1954) considered self-evaluation in his original theory, but additional motives for comparison have been identified. Individuals may also compare themselves to others for the purposes of self-improvement or self-enhancement (Helgeson & Mickelson, 1995; Wood, 1989). When attending to magazines, media users may often engage in self-inspiration social comparisons by looking at characters portrayed in desirable circumstances to achieve similar accomplishments. In fact, magazines often feature 'success stories' about health behavior and appearance changes, family and parenting tips, as well as work and career guidance. For example, Willis and Knobloch-

Westerwick (2014) found that magazine headlines frequently connected health behavior and appearance changes with affective outcomes to motivate readers, such as “Shed 12 pounds and be happy,” (p. 325). Along these lines, weight loss success stories in magazines provide material for inspiration social comparison. When considering gender-typed stereotypical or counter-stereotypical social roles that young women may consider specifically, the relevant accomplishments could be romantic success, rewarding parenting and family experiences, and/or a successful career (see gendered social role categories by Pingree, Hawkins, Butler, & Paisley, 1976; Stenius, Veysey, Hamilton, & Andersen, 2005; Thoits, 1992). Over time, accumulation of selective exposure to portrayals of media characters that represent certain accomplishments may have a lasting impact on media users’ personal life aspirations.

Also central to the SESAM is the role of affect in self-concept, because it encourages motivations to act. Valence of affect is important, because situations that elicit positive affect will be attended to and situations that produce negative feelings will be avoided. The SESAM draws on social comparison and self-discrepancy theories to explain affect’s relationship to self-concept. Affect, or positive or negative feelings, is determined by whether individuals engage in upward, downward, or lateral comparisons, resulting in either assimilation or contrast effects. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) predicts that individuals will experience negative affect when there are discrepancies between their perceived (a) actual self and ideal aspirations for the self (ideal self) and (b) actual self and perceived obligations of the self (ought self). Thus, media users may avoid media messages that will produce negative feelings, or Higgins (1987) suggests that individuals may channel the negative feelings into motivation to improve.

To summarize, SESAM explains how the working self (composed of self-concepts and affect) result in media exposure motivations which drive selective exposure decisions and affect how the messages are subsequently interpreted. Incorporating frameworks of the dynamic self (Marcus & Wurf, 1987), social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), self-evaluation, self-consistency, self-enhancement, and self-improvement are key motives that result in selective exposure (see Author, 2015, and Leary, 2007, for further elaboration on these concepts). Then, exposure and responses to the messages influence the self.

Possible Future Selves and Gender-Typed Social Roles

Possible future selves (PFS) “represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954) pertaining to a vision of the self that the individual could become in the future. The visions of what roles and values an individual might personify in the future are shaped by both the past self and perceptions of the present self. In everyday life, the PFS will govern many motivations and decisions as individuals aspire toward desired PFS and aim to avoid feared PFS. For example, a young woman may aspire to becoming a happily married spouse and may, on the other hand, fear becoming a divorced single mother. She may hope to become a successful professional while fearing she may not find a job. The hoped for romantic partner PFS of a happy spouse and the feared PFS of divorcee may motivate the woman to work on her marital relationship, compromising with her partner; the hoped for career PFS will likely motivate her to invest in her vocational education and career skills. Obviously, PFS will shift throughout individuals’ life stages, but the current PFS continues to shape actions, perceptions, as well as key life decisions (Cross & Markus, 1991) as they entertain and deliberate visions of their future.

Empirical research has demonstrated the effects of PFS on individuals' life decisions and their according behaviors. For instance, the homemaker PFS shapes partner selections (Eagly, Eastwick, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2009), and changes in self-regulatory behavior among high school students occurred as a result of a PFS shift instigated by an intervention (designed to provide strategies to pursue and persist in pursuing the academic possible selves; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). PFS are known to be gender-typed, with women envisioning more family-related PFS than men (Brown & Diekman, 2010). With these influences of the PFS on important life outlooks and decisions in mind, the present work examines how young women selectively attend to media messages and thus regulate their PFS, and how media use may affect PFS, with a focus on gender-typed stereotypical and counter-stereotypical PFS.

Gender-typed social roles that women may perceive as relevant include the mother/homemaker role, the beauty ideal role with high attractiveness for romantic partnership, and the counter-stereotypical professional role (see categories by Pingree et al., 1976; Stenius, et al., 2005; Thoits, 1992). These pervasive social roles may provide templates for women's PFS that are associated with hopes and fears. How a young woman feels regarding her PFS in these roles likely shapes her persistence and efforts in pursuing a career, having a romantic relationship, or starting a family (Markus & Nurius, 1987.) With these life outlooks in mind, a young woman may turn to specific media content that portrays similar others reaching the life accomplishments she deems desirable, reinforcing her desire, motivations, and actions for those accomplishments in her own life.

Selective Self-Reinforcement of Gender-Typed Social Roles Through Media Use

Numerous investigations have yielded that males and females exhibit different media content preferences. For example, Collins-Standley, Gan, Yu, & Zillmann (1996) found that preschool girls preferred romantic picture books while boys favored violence in picture books. Similarly, Author et al. (2005) demonstrated that preschoolers in the U.S., China, and Germany were more likely to select video entertainment featuring same-gender protagonists, with boys preferring violence and girls preferring non-violent entertainment. Further research suggests that sports media consumption may shape perceptions of various sports as gender-typed and affect participation therein (Hardin & Greer, 2009) and that the males and females also prefer different types of news (Grabe & Kamhawi, 2006; Authors, 2007). Results along these lines have been interpreted with a self-socialization perspective (e.g., Bussey & Bandura, 1984), according to which individuals selectively attend to same-sex role models, or with the social comparison perspective (Author, 2006), which postulates that individuals prefer similar (e.g., same-sex) targets for social comparisons, even when portrayed in the news.

Some research that did not allow participants to selectively attend to media messages has demonstrated that media exposure does have a gender-typing effect. For example, exposure to gender-stereotypic television commercials has been shown to negatively impact women's performance on counter-stereotypical tasks (math tests), as well as heighten their reported preference for stereotypically feminine educational and vocational options over counter-stereotypical options (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gehardstein, 2002). Women exposed to traditional gender roles regarding occupations (a male doctor and a female nurse) reported higher automatic gender stereotypes and lower interest in masculine occupations (Rudman & Phelan, 2010). Conversely, exposure to a counter-stereotypical images of women in leadership roles

reduced implicit self-stereotyping and increased leadership self-concepts if the women depicted were perceived to be similar to participants (Asgari, Dasgupta, & Stout, 2012). Beyond encouraging stereotypical differences between gender groups, media exposure has been shown to affect specific aspects of gender identity. In a prolonged exposure experiment by Authors (2012), women viewed magazine pages either from the beauty magazine genre, the business magazine genre, or the parenting magazine genre for five days in a row—three days after the last exposure, the gender roles featured in the presented stimuli, depending on experimental group, were still more salient.

However, research evidence that actually demonstrates a mutually reinforcing process in which individuals select media messages in gender-typed ways and subsequently conform more to gender roles is scarce. One study by Authors (2012) showed that college-age women, when given the choice, read primarily women's magazines, whereas men attended primarily to magazine genres commonly associated with men (i.e., sports and computer game magazines). Moreover, this study found that, after selective magazine browsing, participants scored higher in gender conformity the more gender-typed material they had consumed. This effect, however, may have been due to priming and thus short-lived, as the impact was measured right after magazine reading. The current study aims to extend this line of research to further explain selective media use and subsequent impacts by drawing on the SESAM and by highlighting the longitudinal processes that may be at work.

Current Study

Interestingly, magazine genres correspond well with the social role categories of parent, professional, and beauty ideal/romantic partner that are commonly projected onto women as

traditional or unconventional roles they may fulfill. Exposure to these genres should affect aspirations along the lines of possible future selves. These genres should attract women to whom the related possible future selves are more relevant, and exposure to them should in turn foster this relevance. Such impact could accumulate across time and result in lasting effects that have important long-term implications for individuals' life outlooks as well as their persistence and efforts in accomplishing life goals.

The present study examines these considerations through a prolonged selective exposure study. After completing a baseline session on day 1, young women were asked to browse magazine content featuring women in different social roles for four daily media exposure sessions. Three days after the last exposure, a post-session captured lasting effects of the accumulated selective exposure on young women's life outlooks, i.e., their possible future selves. The following specific hypotheses were tested, with H1-3 pertaining to predictors of content selection, H4-6 addressing effects of selective exposure, and H7-9 postulating self-regulation per the SESAM. Further based on the SESAM is the postulation in H10 that the proposed media effects involve social comparison mechanisms. To facilitate social comparison through similar others (Festinger, 1954), the study included only Caucasian participants and Caucasian portrayals.

H1: Women who attach more relevance to their possible future self as romantic partner show a greater preference for beauty magazine content.

H2: Women who attach more relevance to their possible future self as parent show a greater preference for parenting magazine content.

- H3: Women who attach more relevance to their possible future self as career professional show a greater preference for business magazine content.
- H4: Selective exposure to beauty magazine content fosters relevance of the possible future self as romantic partner.
- H5: Selective exposure to parenting magazine content fosters relevance of the possible future self as parent.
- H6: Selective exposure to business magazine content fosters relevance of the possible future self as career professional.
- H7: Women who attach more relevance to their possible future self as romantic partner foster this relevance via greater selective exposure to beauty magazine content.
- H8: Women who attach more relevance to their possible future self as parent foster this relevance via greater selective exposure to parenting magazine content.
- H9: Women who attach more relevance to their possible future self as career professional foster this relevance via greater selective exposure to business magazine content.
- H10: The effects proposed in H4-6 depend on media users' engagement in self-inspiration social comparisons.

Methods

Overview

Adult white women between 18 and 25 years of age ($N = 181$) participated in an online prolonged selective exposure study, presented as a study on enjoyment of magazine articles and ads. The study was approved by an Institutional Review Board. To our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind, because earlier related studies either used forced exposure designs (e.g.,

Authors, 2012; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988) or did not specifically observe actual media exposure selections and relied on self-reports instead. All participants received \$50 for completing the study. In the first session, respondents completed a brief sign-up allegedly on magazine advertising and journalism. In the second session, respondents completed baseline measures on a Friday. Then, for four sessions, respondents were exposed to magazine index pages (four at each daily session), from which they selected media messages on the following four days (Saturday-Tuesday), and they completed a final post-test session three days later (Friday). Respondents were given a different index page for each exposure session, which featured four columns with varying genres of magazine content (“Beauty & Looks,” “Family & Home,” “Career & Work,” and “Current Affairs”). Each column included four excerpt options, with each excerpt option including 3 editorial pages and 2 advertising pages. The index page featured an image of the first page of each option to provide visual appeal (please see Appendix A for an example). During each exposure session, participants were asked to make four media selections. Respondents completed evaluation questions at the end of each magazine excerpt selection and at the end of each exposure session to enforce the cover story. The column options were developed to reflect both the stereotypical and counter-stereotypical portrayals of women in contemporary media and common social roles for women, as well as a non-gendered option.

Participants

A total of 181 female participants completed the study. Participants who did not respond to the gender question or identified as transgender were not included in the study. The sample had a mean age of 20.75 years ($SD = 1.83$), and 82.2% of the sample was enrolled in courses toward an undergraduate degree at the time of the study. Participants were allowed to select

multiple relationship status descriptors when reporting their current relationship status, and 49.4% selected single, 2.8% selected casual dating, 20.6% selected exclusively dating, 31.7% selected steady relationship, 2.2% selected engaged, and none selected married. None of the participants reported having any children. The majority of respondents (83.9%) reported working part-time or not working at all. On average, the participants worked $M = 4.1$ hours per week ($SD = 3.0$).

Procedure

Recruitment. A recruitment announcement for the study was made available to college students at a large Midwestern university and a small Northeastern university in the United States through emails from faculty members. The recruitment announcement was also posted on popular social networking sites (e.g., Facebook). The flyer announced an online, 7-day study on “magazine advertising and journalism.” Upon completing the study, participants received \$50 per a personal check. The majority of participants were recruited via email (73.9%); 14.4% through online networking sites; and the rest through ‘word of mouth’ (8.3%) and other (3.3%).

Sign up. After providing consent, participants indicated their biological sex, ethnicity, educational achievement, relationship status, maternal status, and other demographics.

Baseline. On the Friday before the media exposure sessions were set to begin, participants answered questions related to their habitual magazine use, psychological states and traits including femininity and masculinity, and further demographics. At the end of the session, participants were thanked for their time and notified that they would receive the link for the second session the next day.

Daily sessions. On the following day, the four selective exposure sessions began. On each of these days, the session began with “Welcome back for a daily session of our online study on magazine enjoyment! Today you will be asked to make several magazine selections according to your own personal interests. Please take your time to respond to the questions and to review the magazine pages.” Participants then viewed the magazine index page, made a selection, and then clicked through the corresponding magazine excerpt, much as they would if they were turning the pages of a magazine (see ‘Stimuli’ section for a description). To support the cover story of a study on magazine advertising and journalism, following perusal of the selected magazine excerpt, participants were asked several distractors, such as “These pages were interesting” and “These pages were informative” on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*. Additionally, participants were asked to rate several social comparison items, including “The information on the pages helped me to evaluate myself” and “I compared myself to the women on the pages” on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Participants were shown the index page, asked to make four selections, and viewed the different selected excerpts during the exposure session. To avoid sensitization to variables of interest, daily media exposure beyond the study sessions was not measured. Habitual media use measures from the baseline served to approximate their media use outside of the research.

Post-test session. The post-test session was completed three days after the last daily exposure session and presented the same psychological measures as the baseline session.

Stimuli

In each of the four daily exposure sessions, participants made four magazine excerpt selections, viewing a total of 20 magazine pages (12 magazine articles and 8 magazine advertisements) per day. Each index page featured 16 magazine excerpt options, divided evenly between four topic columns (“Beauty & Looks,” “Family & Home,” “Career & Work,” and “Current Affairs”). Thus, each exposure session offered a total of 80 magazine pages from contemporary magazines. Articles and ads alternated in each magazine excerpt. To avoid sequence effects, the presentation order of the index pages was reversed for half of the participants. Four research assistants selected pages from popular magazines for use in the study. Selection parameters included that (1) each article and ad page featured a one-page, complete message pertaining to the relevant category, (2) the verbal content of the magazine pages was naturally related to the imagery, (3) the messages were generally positive and suggested self-efficacy and potential reward for suggested behavior, and (4) for the “Beauty & Looks,” “Family & Home,” & “Career & Work” pages, the page prominently featured an image of a Caucasian, non-celebrity woman. This approach of selecting stimuli has been proven effective in past work: Authors (2013) conducted a stimuli test in which women categorized the stimuli magazine pages in line with the categories chosen by the researchers. The pages in the *Beauty & Looks* category came from magazines such as *Shape*, *Vogue*, *Allure*, and *Self*. The specific pages were selected because they featured images of women in beauty ideal portrayals. The articles pertained to beauty, style, and achieving or maintaining good looks. The advertisements in this section featured women and beauty products. The *Family & Home* category portrayed women in homemaker roles happily participating in activities with the children or decorating the home. Articles and advertisements came from magazines including *Parenting*, *Family Circle*, and

Parents. Similarly, the ads and articles in the *Career & Work* category showed women in a positive manner who were portrayed as competent in their careers. Articles came from magazines such as *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, and *Inc. Magazine*. The advertisements in this section featured women working as well. Finally, the *Current Affairs* articles were taken from magazines including *Time* and *Science News*. None of the articles or advertisements in this category had any people in them. Article topics included technology and scientific discoveries. Advertisements featured cars, food, and pet products. Appendix A shows the index page.

Measures

Habitual magazine use. Participants were asked at baseline to indicate their frequency of magazine exposure in the last 7 days, on an 11-point scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘10 or more times.’ Magazine use was categorized by types: News/Politics ($M = 0.74$, $SD = 1.72$), Business ($M = 0.37$, $SD = 1.33$), Health/Fitness ($M = 1.13$, $SD = 1.7$), Fashion/Style ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 2.3$), Bridal/Wedding ($M = 0.29$, $SD = 1.02$), Home/Garden ($M = 0.39$, $SD = 1.22$), Cooking/Food ($M = 0.93$, $SD = 1.77$), Entertainment/Celebrities ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 2.3$), and Lifestyle ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 1.36$). An exploratory factor analysis using varimax was performed on all items and two main factors emerged that were collapsed in sum scores: Fashion, Lifestyle & Entertainment ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 4.77$), and Business & News/Politics, ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 2.77$). Items were retained if they produced a primary loading of at least 0.7 and did not produce a secondary loading of more than 0.25.

Other media use. Participants were asked at baseline to indicate their frequency of exposure to the following types of media (how many days in an average week): television in general ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 2.3$), fictional TV series ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.79$), television news ($M =$

1.68, $SD = 1.97$), movies on TV ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.64$), movies on DVD ($M = 1.04$, $SD = 1.39$), newspaper ($M = 0.98$, $SD = 1.68$), and magazine websites ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 1.85$).

Possible future selves. Fifteen items from the Life Role Salience scale (Amatea, Cross, Clark, & Bobby, 1986) were used to create three possible future self measures. PFS was measured at two points in the study: in the baseline session and the post-test three days after the daily selective exposure sessions. The reliability scores are reported for both the baseline and post-test: romantic PFS (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$) baseline $M = 68.55$ ($SD = 21.29$), post-exposure $M = 70.44$ ($SD = 17.76$); parent PFS (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$) baseline $M = 67.58$ ($SD = 28.21$), post-exposure $M = 68.44$ ($SD = 26.94$); and professional PFS (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$) baseline $M = 63.69$ ($SD = 20.62$), post-exposure $M = 64.83$ ($SD = 18.83$). Each subscale consisted of five items. Sample items included, "I expect my future romantic relationship will give me more real personal satisfaction than anything else," "My life will seem empty if I never have children," and "Having a career in the future is my most important goal." Participants responded to items on a slider scale ranging from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 100 = *strongly agree*.

Femininity and masculinity. Femininity and masculinity were measured with Bem's (1981) short form of the sex role inventory, with 10 items for each construct (for example, "I am willing to take a stand" for masculinity and "I am eager to soothe hurt feelings" for femininity), that were rated on a slider scale from 0 to 100, with the anchors *never true* and *always true*. The ten femininity items yielded a Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$ and were thus condensed with an average score, $M = 70.7$ ($SD = 15.7$). The ten masculinity items were very reliable, with Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$, and were also collapsed into a mean score, $M = 59.8$ ($SD = 15.2$).

Inspiration motivation. After viewing each magazine excerpt, participants were asked to rate the statement, “The information on the pages inspired me to improve myself” on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* to measure the self-inspiration motive. This statement was modeled after social comparison statements created by Helgeson & Michelson (1995) and intentionally designed to be very brief to avoid sensitization and respondent fatigue. This item was embedded in other questions pertaining to other social comparison dimensions¹, and distractor items such as “I paid close attention to the pages/These pages were interesting/These pages were informative.” In total, respondents rated the same inspiration motivation statement 16 times, after each excerpt they selected (unless they chose a current affairs magazine excerpt, which did not feature individuals and where a parallel statement “The information on the pages inspired me to think about societal matters” was used instead). The ratings for self-inspiration were condensed with an average score for each of the magazine genres: beauty magazine $M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.23$; parenting magazine $M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.23$; business magazine $M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.27$.

Magazine selection. The women made 16 magazine excerpt selections and viewed 80 pages in total. On average, participants selected beauty segments $M = 7.84$ times ($SD = 3.46$), homemaking segments $M = 2.92$ times ($SD = 1.94$), career segments $M = 2.89$ times ($SD = 1.84$), and current affairs segments $M = 2.35$ times ($SD = 2$).

In addition to what segment participants selected, the online application recorded how much time was spent on each individual page. If a participant spent more than 240 seconds on an individual page, this exposure time was set to missing value, as the participant appeared to be distracted when viewing the page. On average, $M = .71$ missing values ($SD = 1.73$) out of 80

page exposure times occurred. The analyses described in the following thus excluded these outlier exposure times.

The women spent $M = 32.42$ minutes ($SD = 19.97$) in total on viewing magazine pages across the four exposure sessions, which included $M = 13.58$ ($SD = 11.79$) on beauty segments, $M = 6.79$ ($SD = 6$) on homemaking segments, $M = 7.43$ ($SD = 7.95$) on career segments, and $M = 7.27$ ($SD = 8.11$) on current affairs segments. Hence, the participants spent $M = 44\%$ ($SD = 24$) of their time on beauty segments, $M = 19\%$ ($SD = 15$) on homemaking segments, $M = 19\%$ ($SD = 14$) on career segments, and $M = 17\%$ ($SD = 16$) on current affairs segments. When accessing beauty pages, participants spent $M = 20.76$ s ($SD = 12.31$, $N = 181$) on a beauty page, $M = 25.41$ s ($SD = 16.86$, $N = 162$) on a homemaking page, $M = 27.50$ s ($SD = 22.58$, $N = 165$) on a career page, and $M = 31.59$ s ($SD = 24.79$, $N = 149$) on a current affairs page. All women accessed beauty pages at least once, 9% never selected business magazines, 11% did not choose parenting magazines, and 18% did not look at current affairs at all.

Eight participants were excluded from further analyses because they spent less than 7 minutes in total on the 80 magazine pages and thus did not seem to engage with the browsing task. Hence, 173 women were included in the sample for hypotheses testing.

Results

Impacts of Possible Future Selves on Selective Magazine Reading

H1-3 proposed that women's PFS predicted their selective exposure to magazine content such that those who attach more relevance to their PFS as romantic partner, parent, and career professional showed greater preference for beauty, parenting, and business magazines respectively. Regression analyses² served to test these hypotheses, with the first three analyses

using time spent on the three target magazine genres as criteria and salience of PFS as romantic partner, of PFS as parent, and of PFS as professional as predictors. Additionally, age, relationship status (single: yes/no), work hours, femininity, and masculinity served as control variables. Only the regression model to predict time spent on beauty magazine pages yielded significant effects, reported in Table 1. Greater salience of the romantic partner PFS led to longer viewing of beauty magazine pages in line with H1, whereas greater salience of parent PFS and professional PFS reduced it.

Three additional regression analyses² were conducted to examine *proportional* selective magazine exposure, simply by adding total time spent viewing magazine pages as an additional control variable. Table 1 reports the results and shows that the salience of romantic partner future self had a significant positive impact on exposure to beauty magazine pages in line with H1, while greater salience of parent future self fostered exposure to parenting magazines in line with H2. Further, higher salience of professional future self led to longer exposure to career magazine content, corroborating H3.

Impacts of Selective Magazine Reading on Possible Future Selves

Subsequently, H4-6 predicted that selective exposure to beauty, parenting, and business magazines would foster women's PFS as romantic partner, parent, and career professional; and H7-9 suggested that magazine viewing mediated the relationship between women's PFS salience pre-exposure and post-exposure. Three mediation analyses with bootstrapping (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) served to examine these hypotheses, with one analysis for each PFS as romantic partner, parent, and professional.

The first mediation analysis² (see Figure 1) utilized salience of possible future self as romantic partner measured at baseline as independent variable and measured at the post-session as dependent variable. Time spent on the three target magazine genres served as mediators. Again, age, relationship status (single: yes/no), work hours, femininity and masculinity along with total time spent viewing magazine pages served as control variables. The results are illustrated in Figure 1. Romantic partner PFS measured at the baseline marginally predicted participants' time spent viewing beauty magazines (coefficient = .06, *S. E.* = .03, *p* = .10) but not time viewing parenting or business magazines (*n.s.*). Further, in line with H4, time spent viewing beauty pages significantly predicted romantic partner PFS post-exposure, (coefficient = .41, *S. E.* = .13, *p* < .005). Viewing business magazines also significantly influenced romantic partner PFS (coefficient = .59, *S. E.* = .20, *p* < .005), which will be examined further in exploratory analyses below, but viewing parenting magazines had no effect. Finally, romantic partner PFS measured in the baseline influenced romantic partner PFS post-exposure through the indirect effect of time spent on beauty magazines, with a point estimate of .03 and a 95% BCa (bias-corrected and accelerated) bootstrap confidence interval of .001 to .07, thus providing support for H7. Viewing parenting magazines and business magazines had no indirect influence on romantic partner PFS post-exposure as the confidence intervals included zero (*n.s.*).

A parallel mediation analysis² regarding parent PFS yielded no mediation effects and is thus not reported in greater detail. H5 and H8 were not supported in this analysis.

The third mediation analysis² (see Figure 2) utilized professional PFS measured at baseline as independent variable and measured at the post-session as dependent variable, along with the same mediators and control variables as above. As illustrated in Figure 2, professional

PFS marginally predicted participants' time spent viewing business magazines (coefficient = .04, *S. E.* = .02, $p = .06$), and there was no influence of professional PFS on selection of beauty or parenting magazines (*n.s.*). Time spent on business, parenting, or beauty magazines did not predict professional PFS post-exposure (*n.s.*). Thus the impact of selective exposure to business magazine pages on professional PFS per H6 was not supported in this analysis. Finally, professional PFS measured in the baseline had an indirect influence via time spent viewing business pages on participants' professional PFS post-exposure with a point estimate of .02 and a 95% BCa (bias-corrected and accelerated) bootstrap confidence interval of .001 to .06, providing support for H9. There were no indirect effects via time spent on beauty or magazine pages (*n.s.*).

Social Comparisons and Selective Exposure Effects on Possible Future Selves

Finally, H10 predicted that the effects proposed in H4-6 depend on media users' engagement in self-inspiration social comparisons. To test this hypothesis, we examined whether the selective exposure effects on PFS depended on the extent to which participants derived inspiration from viewing magazine pages with the MODPROBE macro (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). The first analysis used selective reading of beauty pages as predictor of romantic partner PFS at post-session and level of self-inspiration during beauty pages reading as moderator, while controlling for romantic partner PFS at baseline, time spent on business and on parenting magazine pages, as well as habitual reading of fashion and celebrities magazines and news and business magazines. It yielded no moderating effect.

The second analysis investigated selective reading of parenting magazines as predictor of parent PFS at post-session and level of self-inspiration during parenting magazine reading as moderator, while controlling for parent PFS at baseline, time spent on business and on parenting

magazine pages, as well as habitual reading of fashion and celebrities magazines and news and business magazines. As not all participants picked parenting content in their browsing selections, the sample size was reduced to 161 participants for which self-inspiration data were available. The analysis yielded no moderating effect.

The third analysis examined selective reading of business pages as predictor of professional PFS at post-session and level of self-inspiration during business pages reading as moderator, while controlling for professional PFS at baseline, time spent on beauty and on parenting magazine pages, as well as habitual reading of fashion and celebrities magazines and news and business magazines. Because not all participants selected viewing business magazine pages in the first place, the sample size was reduced to 164 participants for which self-inspiration data were available. The moderation effect was significant, $b = -.001$, $S.E. = .0024$, $p = .048$. This moderation emerged because among participants who engaged less in inspiration social comparisons (inspiration motivation ≤ 2.50 per Johnson-Neyman technique) while viewing business pages, the time spent on viewing these pages had even more positive impact on professional PFS at post-session ($b \geq .001$, $p \leq .044$). In general, time spent on business pages, $b = .022$, $S.E. = .010$, $p = .038$, had a significant positive impact on professional PFS at post-session in this analysis, in line with H6. Greater engagement in self-inspiration fostered professional PFS at post-session as well, $b = 3.48$, $S.E. = 1.19$, $p = .004$.

An unexpected impact had emerged in that viewing business magazines significantly fostered romantic partner PFS, as reported in the mediation analysis above. To examine this impact further per reviewer request, an additional exploratory moderation analysis was conducted. It examined whether contrasting as a specific social comparison process (Corcoran et

al., 2011) while viewing business women portrayals might encourage young women to focus more on romance. Along with the inspiration motivation, another item had captured contrasting with “I felt different from the women on the pages” rated after each magazine excerpt. The moderation analyses with Johnson-Neyman technique reflected a weak moderation from contrasting with the business women portrayals, $b = .003$, $S.E. = .002$, $p = .104$: Participants who reported high levels of contrasting with these portrayals tended to increase more in their romance PFS the more they viewed business pages, whereas the opposite was true for participants who reported low levels of contrasting with the business women. The counterintuitive positive impact of selective exposure to business pages on romance PFS was no longer significant when including the moderation impact.

Discussion

The present investigation built on the Selective Exposure Self- and Affect Management (SESAM) model to examine whether individuals shape their own life aspirations (possible future selves, PFS) by selectively attending to media messages. In a prolonged selective exposure study that spanned eight days, young women in the 18-25 age range viewed magazine excerpts on four consecutive days and selected to read either current affairs, beauty, parenting, or business magazine pages. Before the media exposure session, a baseline session captured participants’ PFS regarding the roles of romantic partner, parent, and professional. The same PFS measures were administered three days after the last media exposure session to capture persisting effects of selective exposure. Overall, the findings provided support for the theoretical linkages set forth by the SESAM and demonstrated the connection between social comparison processes and media use, particularly in the context of popular magazine exposure.

Over the course of four daily exposure sessions, the young women predominantly spent their time with beauty magazines. The more they were focused on their PFS as romantic partner, the more time they spent with beauty magazines (in line with H1); the less they were focused on their parent PFS and their professional PFS, the more time they spent on beauty magazine pages in absolute measures (when the proportion to total magazine viewing time was not considered). When considering how much time individual participants spent on all magazine browsing, it became clear that greater focus on parent PFS led to longer selective exposure to parenting magazines (supporting H2) and greater focus on professional PFS resulted in more selective exposure to business magazines (supporting H3), while greater salience of the romantic partner PFS still emerged as fostering selective exposure to beauty magazines in line with H1.

Moreover, selective exposure in turn had lasting effects on participants' PFS as measured three days after the last media exposure. In line with H4, the more selective exposure allotted to beauty magazines, the more salient the romantic partner PFS was at post-session. When considering a possible moderating effect (as suggested in H10) of the extent to which participants engaged in self-inspiration social comparison from viewing business pages, the effect suggested in H6 was supported because the young women reported greater focus on their professional PFS at post-session, the more time they had spent with business pages. However, H5 was not supported because selective exposure to parenting magazine content was not found to increase perceived relevance of the PFS as parent.

In line with the processes conceptualized in the SESAM, the initial focus on romantic partner PFS was reinforced via selective exposure to beauty magazines, demonstrated through a mediation effect (H7 supported). Likewise, the focus on professional PFS at baseline was

strengthened from selective exposure to business magazines, shown by a mediation effect (corroborating H9). However, the young women did not engage in selective exposure to parenting magazines in a way that reinforced their parent PFS (H8 not supported)—due to their young age and the fact that they were not yet married and predominantly not in a steady relationship, fostering their parent PFS would probably have not fit their life stage.

Regarding moderating effects of self-inspiration social comparisons on selective exposure effects on possible selves (per H10), only self-inspiration during business magazine browsing yielded the suggested moderation effect. Additionally, self-inspiration social comparisons during business magazine browsing had a positive influence on professional PFS at post-session, which was separate from a significant positive impact of selective exposure to business pages. The present study was likely underpowered in terms of sample size to detect the social comparison moderation three days after last observed media exposure—a challenge stemming from the fact that some participants never picked parenting content and some never picked business magazines for browsing, which reduced the sample size for which data on self-inspiration social comparisons existed. However, interestingly, when considering moderating social comparison influences in an exploratory analysis, the pattern at least suggested that *contrasting* during selective exposure to business magazines even led to greater focus on romance PFS. For some young women, a business career may appear undesirable or unobtainable, which could lead to even greater focus on romantic life paths.

Limitations of this study should be noted, for instance, the sample was not representative and apparently relatively small for detecting the social comparison moderation effects; the viewing of magazine pages on a computer screen is only an approximation of everyday magazine

browsing. To foster simple and optimal conditions for self-inspiration social comparison, the study included all Caucasian participants, and the stimuli featured only Caucasian models. Magazine content was used so that real-world messages across the key genres could be presented in the stimuli. Although magazines are only one of the many media channels women may turn to for messages, for the purposes of testing the SESAM, the channel through which the messages are presented is not nearly as important as the messages themselves. Future investigations should include different or more diverse samples and stimuli to demonstrate the impacts across ethnicity and to parse out the complexity of social comparison between different social groups.

Although the study attempted for a more naturalistic design to mirror effects as they would occur in real life, participants knew they were completing a study on magazine advertising and journalism. Thus, the environment created was not as casual as perusing a magazine in the comfort of one's home, but it offered more selection options than a forced-exposure design would give participants. However, a strength of this investigation is its prolonged selective exposure design; participants were given the opportunity to select media at sixteen points across four days of media exposure sessions. Impacts of their media selections were then measured three days after the last exposure session. Therefore, the results of the study highlight the long-lasting effect of selective media exposure, mirroring media effects as they would occur in real life more than forced-exposure study designs.

The present study highlights the important role media content can play in reinforcing the expectations and goals women have for themselves in the future. This test of the SESAM demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between media selection and one's management of the working self through possible future selves. Previous work (Authors, 2014) has found that

reinforcement of beauty role ideals through media exposure induces positive affective states among young women, even when thinking of their future selves. While the self- and affect-management implications of media use could be understood as beneficial, this may only hold true for individuals whose aspirations fall in line with traditional roles. In the current media landscape, it is more difficult for women with counter-stereotypical aspirations to find inspiration and reinforcement, which may discourage the taking on of desired counter-stereotypical roles. Beauty, fitness, home, and family messages still dominate the content of popular magazines and readily provide self-inspiration models for stereotypical aspirations, while career and work-oriented messages are only featured sporadically. Worse, even when they are presented, they are often coupled with beauty-related content, e.g. “What to wear to work” or “Quick workout routines to do at your desk.” In such a media environment, it is not surprising to find young women predominantly opting to consume beauty magazines even when they have equal options for other types of content. Audience’s habitual selection of stereotypical messages is thus the other part of this equation to solve if media use is to be beneficial for women’s counter-stereotypical aspirations. Finally, beyond the specific context of gendered social roles, the demonstrated patterns of selective exposure self-management likely govern much of our everyday media exposure and help us sustain and regulate how we think about ourselves—in the moment and in future contexts—in literally all life domains, with important implications for our motivations and actions.

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Table 1

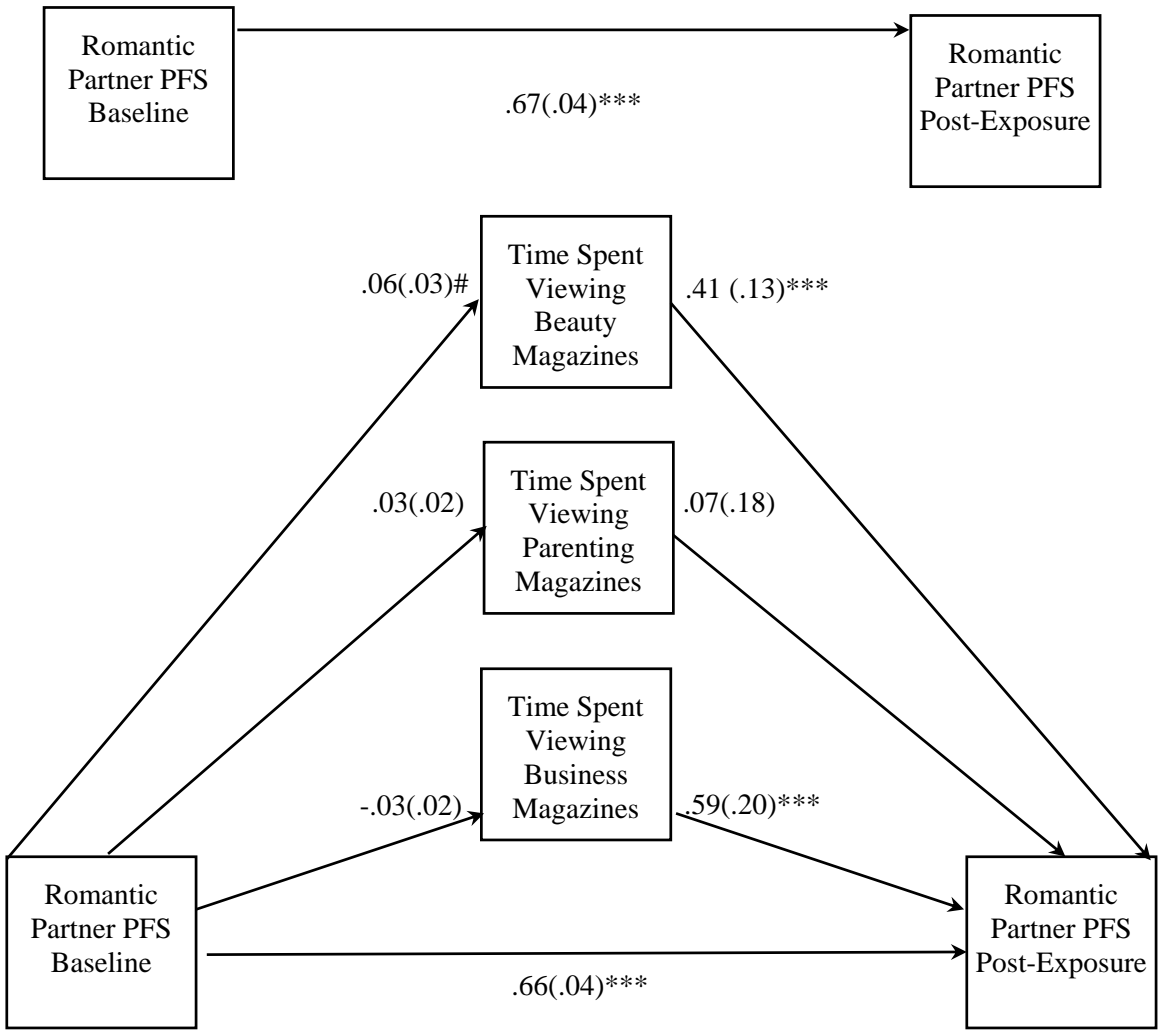
*Impacts of Possible Future Selves Salience on Selective Exposure to Magazine Genres
(beta weights with p values in parentheses)*

	Selective Exposure by Magazine Genre		
	Beauty	Parenting	Business
Possible Future Self			
Romantic Partner	.21 (.028)	.04 (.667)	-.05 (.60)
Parent	-.27 (.009)	.07 (.523)	-.20 (.053)
Professional	-.20 (.017)	-.06 (.448)	.02 (.842)
Control Variables			
Age	-.06 (.519)	.05 (.640)	.19 (.043)
Single (yes/no)	-.16 (.035)	.14 (.064)	.03 (.719)
Work hours	-.08 (.362)	.15 (.103)	-.05 (.576)
Masculinity	.070 (.375)	-.10 (.223)	-.04 (.648)
Femininity	-.021 (.806)	.16 (.065)	.06 (.448)
R ²	.11 (.015)	.10 (.028)	.09 (.042)

Table 2

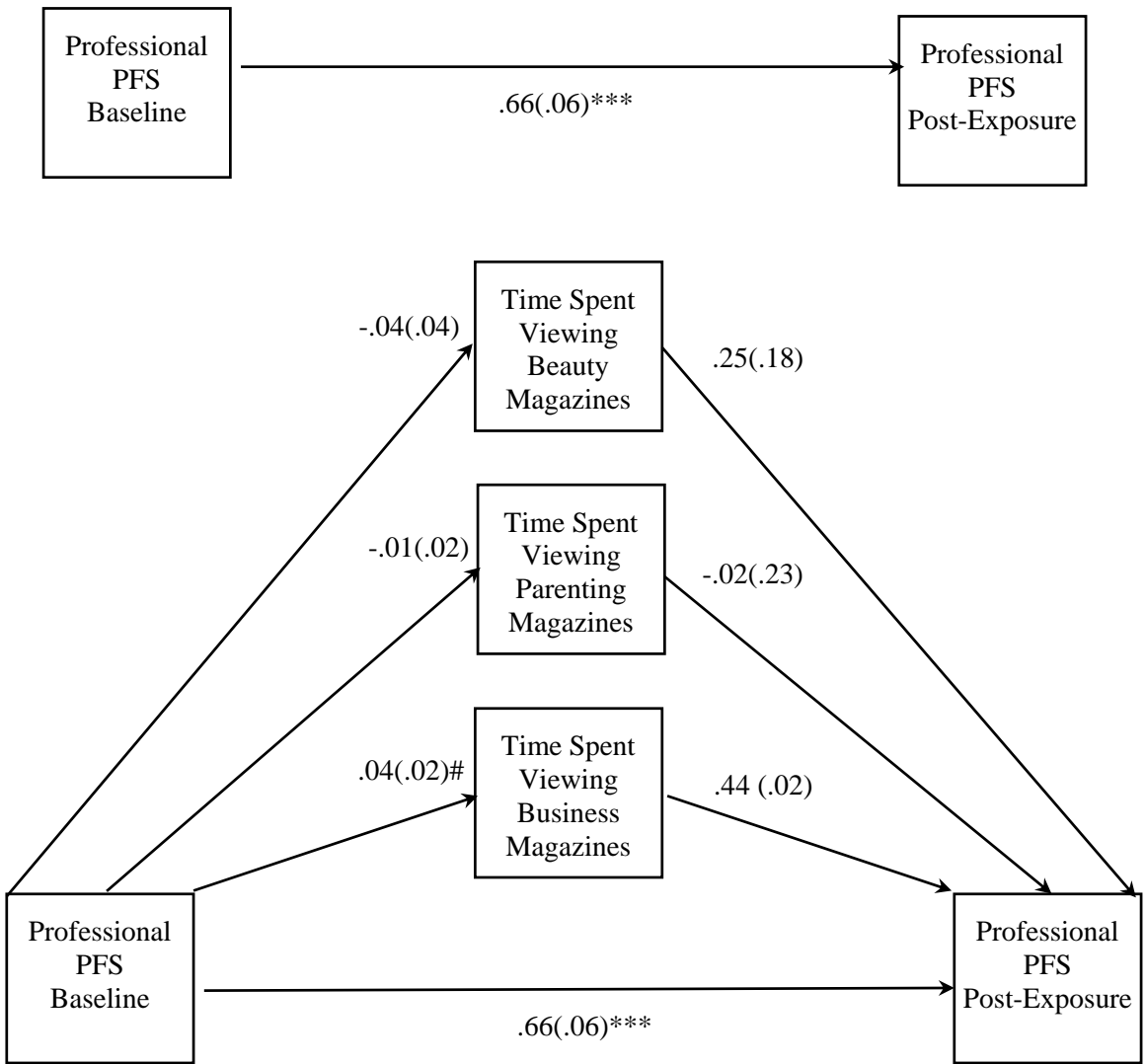
Impacts of Possible Future Selves Salience on Proportional Selective Exposure to Magazine Genres (beta weights with p values in parentheses, non-significant betas omitted)

	Proportional Selective Exposure by Magazine Genre		
	Beauty	Parenting	Business
Possible Future Self			
Romantic Partner	.17 (.031)	.004 (.965)	-.10 (.123)
Parent	-.10 (.271)	.23 (.014)	.02 (.791)
Professional	-.12 (.084)	.01 (.881)	.12 (.041)
Control Variables			
Age	-.13 (.104)	-.02 (.857)	.11 (.092)
Single (yes/no)	-.13 (.034)	.17 (.011)	.06 (.232)
Work hours	-.08 (.301)	.16 (.049)	-.04 (.491)
Masculinity	.07 (.279)	-.10 (.154)	-.04 (.505)
Femininity	-.07 (.365)	.12 (.103)	.01 (.842)
Total Pages Viewing	.58 (>.001)	.52 (>.001)	.73 (>.001)
R ²	.41 (>.001)	.34 (>.001)	.57 (>.001)



Romantic Partner PFS Baseline → Time Spent on Beauty Magazines → Romantic Partner PFS Post-Exposure .03(0.02), 95% CI [.001; .07]
 Romantic Partner PFS Baseline → Time Spent on Parenting Magazines → Romantic Partner PFS Post-Exposure .002(.008), 95% CI [-.01; .03]
 Romantic Partner PFS Baseline → Time Spent on Business Magazines → Romantic Partner PFS Post-Exposure -.02(.01), 95% CI [-.06; .002]

Figure 1. Mediation of media exposure impact processes on romantic partner PSF.
 Note. # $p < .10$. *** $p < .005$.



Professional PFS Baseline → Time Spent on Beauty Magazines → Professional PFS Post-Exposure -.01(0.01), 95% CI [-.05; .004]
 Professional PFS Baseline → Time Spent on Parenting Magazines → Professional PFS Post-Exposure .0002(.006), 95% CI [-.01; .02]
 Professional PFS Baseline → Time Spent on Professional Magazines → Professional PFS Post-Exposure .02(.01), 95% CI [.001; .06]

Figure 2.
 Mediation of media exposure impact processes on Professional PFS.

Note. # $p < .10$. *** $p < .005$.

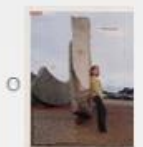
Appendix A

Please click the bubble next to the ONE excerpt you would like to spend some time reading. When you have made your selection, click the ">>" button to begin viewing the excerpt. Then, please take your time viewing and reading each of the pages that follow. Once you have finished looking at all of the pages in your selection, we will ask for your reaction.

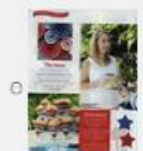
Current Affairs



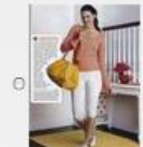
Career & Work



Family & Home



Beauty & Looks



>>

¹ The items to capture social comparison processes were designed to be brief yet tap into different subdimensions of social comparisons (see overview by Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011) that have been included in the SESAM as well: I compared myself to the women on the pages [general comparison]. The information on the pages helped me to evaluate myself [self-evaluation]. The information on the pages inspired me to improve myself [inspiration/self-improvement]. I felt connected to the women on the pages [assimilation]. I felt different from the women on the pages [contrasting]. Based on averages across all rating instances, the five social comparison items yielded Cronbach's alpha of .77 for social comparisons with portrayals on beauty pages, of .74 for parenting content, and of .76 for business pages.

² Upon reviewer request, these analyses was re-run while using the two variables representing habitual use of Fashion, Lifestyle & Entertainment and Business & News/Politics magazines as control variables. The same results patterns emerged.