Abstract

Based on the selective exposure self- and affect-management (SESAM) model and social comparison theory, a 2x2 between-subject experiment was conducted in which participants were primed to think about their future or current self (temporal self manipulation) and to experience positive or negative affect (valence of affect manipulation). Participants then engaged in a selective exposure task to either upward or downward comparison targets, after which their self-evaluation, affect, and possible future self were measured. The results showed that priming future self led to more selective exposure time to upward comparison targets, but priming positive affect did not. Upward comparison time in turn induced more positive self-evaluation, affect, and possible future self. Implications for research in selective exposure, media effects, and communication interventions are discussed.

Keywords: selective exposure, media effects, temporal self, social comparison, possible future self

Temporal Self Impacts on Media Exposure & Effects:

A Test of the Selective Exposure Self- and Affect-Management (SESAM) Model

Social comparisons involve "thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self" (Wood, 1996, pp. 520-521) and are ubiquitous in everyday human experience. People not only compare themselves to people they are close to, but also to strangers, famous people, and media figures (Nabi & Keblusek, 2014; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Since Mares and Cantor (1992) first applied the concept to understand media users' responses to media portrayals, the phenomenon has often been investigated for its potential negative impact: Social comparison to idealized body imagery in the media has been shown to decrease state self-esteem and body satisfaction (Want, 2009). Similarly, social comparison with mediated role models can induce negative mood, self-evaluation, and overall lower interest and performance in the domain of comparison, especially when role models' achievements seem out of reach (Hoyt & Simon, 2011; Authors, 2017). It seems, then, that portrayals of upward social comparison targets in the media may do more harm than good.

However, the role of social comparison target selection and motivations for selection have not been thoroughly considered in previous research in communication, although choice of social comparison targets has been studied extensively in social psychology (Gerber, Wheeler, & Suls, 2018). Yet mediated contexts provide virtually inexhaustible social comparison options, especially with user-generated messages online and role models in communication campaigns (Keller & Brown, 2002; Lee & Shapiro, 2016). Research in computer-mediated communication often shows that people engage in a consistent and substantial amount of social comparison with social media messages, and negative effects result from this process (de Vries & Kühne, 2015; Hanna et al., 2017). Thus far, the existing work predominantly operationalizes social

comparisons as habitual processes and, furthermore, does not allow users any selectivity in attending to media messages. In contrast, the current study conceptualizes social comparison to mediated targets as a dynamic and goal-oriented process which media users employ to manage their self-concepts and affect, and media effects as the outcome of social comparison driven by these motives. Accordingly, observational measures of social comparisons via selective media exposure serves as a key variable. This perspective is guided by the selective exposure self- and affect-management (SESAM) model (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015b) as the main theoretical framework. More specifically, the role of temporal self and affect as predictors of the self-improvement motive, which in turn prompts selective exposure to upward social comparison targets in a mediated context, is examined. Additionally, we examine whether upward social comparison under this motive can lead to positive, instead of negative, media effects.

In the following sections, we first introduce social comparison theory (SCT) and communication research based on SCT. Next, we provide the rationale for the selection of the SESAM model as the theoretical framework, which will then be reviewed in detail. Finally, we discuss more specifically the roles of temporal self and affect on the self-improvement motive, which is the focus of this study, and how this motive influences media selection and effects. Hypotheses derived from this discussion are tested in an experiment: After being primed with current or future self, participants browsed blog posts pertaining to different life domains—romance, friendship, finance, and career—that portrayed the authors as being either upward comparison targets or downward comparison targets. The findings of this experiment shed light on the relationship between individuals' working self, media selection, and media effects.

Social Comparison and Media Choices

SCT was first proposed by Festinger (1954), who posited that humans have a tendency to

compare themselves to other people to evaluate how they perform on a certain domain. This tendency is more pronounced when the domain of interest lacks an objective standard, such as physical or social attractiveness, likability, or popularity, because the more subjective the standard is, the stronger the need to gain accurate information about oneself using other means. Moreover, because the purpose of social comparison here is for accurate information, people prefer targets who are similar to themselves—a process termed *lateral comparison*. Later works explored the additional directions of social comparison processes: Individuals engage in *upward comparison* when they perceive the target to be better than they are on the relevant dimension, or in *downward comparison* when they perceive the target to be worse than they are on said dimension (Collins, 1996; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981). Downward comparison usually increases people's positive affect and self-perception, whereas upward comparison can be either inspiring or threatening depending on the comparison motives, perceptions of the targets, and the relationship between target and self (Collins, 1996; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, Tesser & Campbell, 1982). For a review of this extensive literature, see Gerber et al. (2018).

A substantial body of research in communication focuses on exposure to upward comparison targets in both mass and computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its effects. Specifically, exposure to body ideals in mass media as a type of upward comparison target was often shown to induce negative affect and reduce body satisfaction (e.g., Want, 2009). Research in CMC established that people frequently engage in social comparison when using social media (Hanna et al., 2017). Because social media allow users to exclusively present positive aspects of their lives (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), social media posts often feature upward comparison targets. Upward social comparison in this context has been associated with more negative affect and self-perception, heightened feelings of loneliness, more depressive symptoms, and worsened

mental health (de Vries & Kühne, 2015; Hanna et al., 2017; Yang, 2016). Thus, upward

comparison has generally been considered to have a negative impact on media users.

When it comes to predictors of social comparison in mass communication or CMC, most

studies focused on trait variables, such as gender (Fox & Vendemia, 2016), trait self-esteem

(Cramer, Song, & Drent, 2016), social comparison orientation (Lee, 2014; Yang, 2016), and

personality traits (Gerson, Plagnol, & Corr, 2016). In contrast to the current study, most studies

in this context have relied on survey or forced exposure designs, and the issue of target selection

was not investigated in depth. Instead, they generally looked at the impacts of these trait

predictors on the amount of social media use or social comparison activities and the effects of

said exposure, and thus conceptualized exposure to upward comparison targets as a stable

process in which some individuals habitually engage despite its negative impacts. Research in

social psychology, on the other hand, has been exploring the situational conditions in which

individuals would prefer upward vs. downward comparison targets, such as whether the

comparison is public or private (Wilson & Benner, 1971), whether the domain of comparison is

improvable or not (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008), and if they were made to feel self-affirmed

(Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001) or self-compassionate (Breines & Chen, 2012) before selecting

the targets. The current study adds to this literature by examining the role of self-related motives

– a state predictor – in both the target selection process and the outcomes of this type of media

use. Given that social media provide an abundance of social comparison targets, it is pivotal to

understand how individuals choose and compare themselves with others in this context, as well

as how the resulting exposure influences them.

To do so, we apply the selective exposure self- and affect management (SESAM) model

to consider social comparison as a goal-oriented behavior to satisfy a state self-related motive.

Below we review the SESAM model in depth, as it builds on and integrates important relevant perspectives from the uses-and-gratifications approach, mood management theory, and social comparison theory (see Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015b, for elaboration).

The Selective Exposure Self- and Affect Management (SESAM) Model

The SESAM model (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015b) presents a conceptualization of the reciprocal relationship between the working self and affect, selective exposure, and media effects. Selective exposure is defined as media users' choice to engage with particular media messages rather than other available messages, or a bias in media choice (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015a). The model was chosen as the focal theoretical framework for three reasons. First, it provides a cohesive model to integrate social psychological theories of social comparison and self-evaluation motives into research in media processes, including selective exposure, message processing, and media effects. Second, compared to other communication research in social comparison, the model focuses not only on the outcome of exposure to messages with social comparison targets, but also on the *situational* factors that influence selection of these messages. And third, it allows for the conceptualization of social comparison in media use as a dynamic, active, goal-oriented process to satisfy a self-related motive.

The SESAM model was built on the dynamic self framework, in which the self-concept is conceptualized as a multifaceted and dynamic network of interconnected self-schemas (i.e., cognitive representations of the self in particular domains), which is highly active in many cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes (Markus & Wurf, 1987). At any given time, depending on situational factors, a particular *self-schema* will be made salient and active in the working memory, and this self-schema is referred to as the *working self*. The working self tends to include an affective component, usually determined by how close the individuals are to who

they hope, want, or expect to become (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986. The overarching proposition of the model suggests that individuals select media messages to manage this working self and affect via social comparison to mediated targets, the process of which is described below (for a graphical representation of the model, see Figure 1).

The working self and affect can together trigger a *self-evaluation motive*, which can be satisfied by *social comparison* and can prompt selective exposure behavior to messages with the appropriate comparison targets. The self-evaluation motives (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995) can serve as social comparison motives because social comparison processes can prompt a change or reinforcement in self-perceptions and thus satisfy these motives. Media messages provide a wide variety of social comparison targets for this self-management purpose (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015b). Within the model, two self-evaluation motives, self-enhancement and self-improvement, serve to specifically influence the directions of social comparison, and thus selective exposure to either downward or upward comparison targets. People can engage in *downward comparison* to fulfill the *self-enhancement* motive (to increase the positivity of their self-perceptions and feel better about themselves), or in *upward comparison* to fulfill the *self-improvement* motive (to improve themselves on a certain dimension) (Sedikides, & Hepper, 2009; Taylor et al., 1995). For example, people motivated by self-enhancement may turn to some reality TV programs with their depictions of people in worse situations to engage in downward comparison (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003). On the other hand, people with a self-improvement motive can find a variety of media messages that feature people successful in different domains to engage in upward comparison, such as online health messages (Authors, 2013) or fitness magazines (Authors, 2011). Further, the self-improvement motive was shown to influence not only the selection of upward comparison targets, but also the

outcome of the comparison process: When people engage in upward comparison motivated by self-improvement, the effect can be self-enhancing rather than self-deflating. People reported feeling better about themselves, feeling more satisfied with their current life situations or attributes, and engaging in better coping behaviors (Collins, 1996; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2005; Veldhuis, Konjin, & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017).

Because the self-evaluation motives are determined by the working self and affect, they are responsive to situational factors instead of being static like other individual traits and dispositions. Thus, the SESAM model predicts that the social comparison process people prefer and the messages they select can change from time to time in order to manage their current working self and affect. The current study serves to test this prediction by experimentally manipulating a component of the working self, namely the *temporal self*, along with *affect*, and observe their impacts on the self-improvement motive, selective exposure to social comparison targets, and outcomes of said exposure. Below, we elaborate on how the temporal self and affect are expected to impact the self-improvement motive, and thus influence selective exposure to and effects from messages featuring upward comparison targets.

Temporal Self Impact on the Self-Improvement Motive & Upward Comparison

The current study draws on a particular aspect of the self—the *temporal self*—to predict the self-improvement motive and subsequent selective exposure to upward comparison targets in media messages. The temporal aspect of the self refers to whether the representations of past, present, or future selves are currently salient in the working self, and it is an important part of the dynamic self (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Research has shown that in addition to the current self (who people think they are in the present), people hold possible future selves (who people think they can potentially be in the future) in various domains, and these individualized future selves

provide both guidance and motivation for current behaviors (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004).

Overall, research has shown that the self-improvement motive, future self, and upward social comparison are strongly associated (Sedikides, & Hepper, 2009; Taylor et al., 1995). The rationale for the link between future self and the self-improvement motive came from studies showing that when people feel closer to their future self (Hershfield, 2011), or are primed to think about their future self (Hershfield et al., 2011), they allocate more money into savings and accept delayed rewards. This line of research posits that when the future self is salient, the satisfaction and benefits of fulfilling the long-term goal (e.g., having money in the future) become more concrete and real as opposed to the immediate benefits (e.g. spending money now). In other words, when primed with their future self as opposed to their current self, individuals tend to shift their focus to long-term goals and are more likely to behave consistently with the self-improvement motive. Additionally, holding a future-focused mindset has been shown to increase the perceived attainability of an upward target because it serves to emphasize the potential for improvement in the future as opposed to the existing shortcomings of the current self (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Veldhui et al., 2017), which can also prompt the self-improvement motive and encourage upward social comparison. Based on this body of evidence, the current study aimed to prime a future self and observe its impact on the self-improvement motive and upward comparison via selective exposure.

H1:   Thoughts about the future self lead to longer selective exposure (i.e., longer viewing) to upward social comparison targets in mediated messages compared to thoughts about the current self.

Affect Impact on the Self-Improvement Motive & Upward Comparison

The impact of affect on self-evaluation motives and social comparison processes has been less consistent in the literature. From the perspective of affect-as-information theory (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), valence of affect is considered an indicator of the favorability of the environment. Positive affect signals safety, goal satisfaction, and progress; whereas negative affect signals danger, goal dissatisfaction, and failure. Thus, when individuals experience negative affect, they would be more likely to hold the self-improvement motive and engage in upward comparison to better their performance and achieve goals. Positive affect, on the other hand, is not expected to motivate people to engage in social comparison behaviors. Indeed, Wheeler and Miyake (1992) found negative affect to be a precursor for upward comparison as opposed to positive affect.

However, upward social comparison, despite providing useful information, does come at a cost. Comparing ourselves to similar others who we think are better than us can lead to a painful decrease in self-esteem (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). It would make sense, then, for people who are experiencing negative affect to be hesitant to engage in upward comparison. From this perspective, research has shown that when people experience negative affect due to a self-threat, they prefer to engage in downward comparison to self-enhance (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Tesser, 2000) and that positive affect serves as a resource that allows people to adequately cope with and process negative or threatening information such as an upward comparison target (Das & Fennis, 2008; Trope & Neter, 1994). Due to the conflicting evidence, we asked the following research question:

RQ1:   Does positive affect lead to longer selective exposure (i.e., longer viewing) to upward social comparison targets in mediated messages compared to negative affect?

Impacts of Selective Exposure on Self-Perceptions and Affect

Once the selective exposure behavior is performed and the target is chosen, the SESAM

model predicts that the self-improvement motive also influences message processing and subsequent message effects (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015b). Social comparison processes have been shown to impact *self-perception* (how positive or negative people perceive their current selves are) and *affect* (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Suls, Martin, Wheeler, 2002). Upward comparison in particular can lead to either positive or negative affect and self-perception depending on the self-evaluation motive. For example, although a negative effect of upward social comparison is usually found after exposure to idealized thin images in the media, Halliwell and Dittmar (2005), Knobloch-Westerwick (2015c), and Veldhuis et al. (2017) found that women who held or were primed with the self-improvement motive actually reported higher body satisfaction (self-perception) and lower anxiety (affect) post-exposure compared to those who held or were primed with a self-assessment motive. The positive effect from the self-improvement motive was suggested to stem from participants socially comparing to the upward comparison targets to learn and motivate themselves to be better in the future, as opposed to socially comparing to contrast where they are right now with the target's achievement in the case of the self-assessment motive. These studies, however, used a forced exposure, instead of a selective exposure, design.

In the context of our study, we expect people who engaged in upward social comparison after being primed with their future self to experience more positive affect and *general self-perception* (holding more positive views of their current selves globally) post-exposure. Thus, the following mediation hypothesis is proposed, and the second research question is posed (for an illustration, see Figure 4 in the results section):

H2:   The effect of future self on (a) post-exposure affect and (b) general self-perception is

       mediated by selective exposure to upward social comparison targets in mediated

messages.

RQ2:   Is the effect of positive affect on (a) post-exposure affect and (b) general self-perception

mediated by selective exposure to upward social comparison targets in mediated

messages?

Finally, the SESAM model predicts a reciprocal relationship between the temporal self

and media selection and exposure: The future self triggers a self-improvement motive, which

drives selective exposure to upward comparison targets. Exposure in turn impacts individuals'

self-perception and affect. The modified working self and affect can then predict subsequent

media selection and exposure, and over time, the accumulated effect from media exposure can

influence the chronic self-concept (Author, 2015).

In the context of this study, we expect selective exposure to upward comparison targets in

a domain to influence participants' current self-perception in the same domain (termed *domain-*

specific self-perception), which can in turn foster their possible future selves. As mentioned

above, the possible future self represents who people think they are *likely* to become in the future

(Markus & Nurius, 1986). The possible future self was chosen as the measure for the reciprocal

effect of media exposure on the self because it was conceptualized to be more malleable than

actual self, allowing any post-exposure change to be detected without a prolonged exposure

design; because it can result from social comparisons with salient others; and because possible

selves have been shown to be important in directing and regulating behaviors, including

subsequent media use and selection (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2004). Indeed,

studies have shown that exposure to social comparison targets in magazines in different domains

foster women's possible selves, and possible selves can predict selective exposure to social

comparison targets (Authors, 2016a; 2016b). The specific domains (romance, friendship, career,

and finances) were considered for the purpose of stimuli sampling and adopted from similar prior work (Authors, 2009). The last hypothesis is as follows (for illustrations, see Appendix E):

H3:   The effect of selective exposure to upward social comparison targets in different life domains [(a) romance, (b) friendship, (c) career, and (d) finance] on possible future selves in the same life domains is mediated by their domain-specific self-perception.

Method

Sample

A total of 292 undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university in the United States completed the study and received class credits as incentive. The sample had a mean age of 20.34 years ($SD = 2.73$), with 113 (38.7%) men, 175 (59.9%) women, and four people who declined to report their gender. 211 (72.3%) participants self-identify as White, 33 (11.3%) as Black/African American, 15 (5.1%) as Hispanic/Latino, 39 (13.4%) as Asian/Pacific Islanders, 1 (0.7%) as Native American, and 4 (1.4%) as "Other."

Design & Procedure

The study employed a 2 (temporal self: current vs. future) x 2 (valence of affect: positive vs. negative) between-subject factorial design. In a lab experiment supposedly to evaluate online blog posts, participants first completed baseline measures in which they reported their global self-esteem and their life role salience in the four domains (romance, friendship, career, and finance). They were then randomly assigned to one of four creative writing tasks, ostensibly to assess their own writing style to see if it matches with the authors of the blog posts' styles. This writing task served as the manipulation of temporal self and affect to induce different levels of the self-improvement motive (see *Manipulations* for more details).

Participants were then presented with an online blog platform featuring posts supposedly

written by recent graduates from the same university. The posts were categorized into four

domains (romance, friendship, career, and finance), and in each domain, there were two posts

from alumni who are succeeding (upward comparison targets) and two posts from alumni who

are failing (downward comparison targets), resulting in 16 choices in total (see *Stimuli* for more

details). Participants were told to browse and read whichever posts interested them. This

selective exposure session lasted five minutes. While they browsed, the software unobtrusively

measured the time spent on each post in 15-second intervals for a total of five minutes, resulting

in 20 repeated measures for social comparison via selective exposure. After the time allotted had

elapsed, a pop-up notification informed participants that the browsing time was over and

prompted them to click *Next* to proceed to the posttest. They first evaluated the blog posts to

enforce the cover story and to tap into the extent to which social comparisons occurred. Then,

they reported their post-exposure affect, general and domain-specific self-perceptions, possible

future selves, and demographic information. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Manipulations

To manipulate levels of the self-improvement motive, either the current or the future

temporal self was primed. Participants were instructed to engage in a creative writing task

designed to prime them with positive ($N = 148$) or negative ($N = 144$) affect, and with their

current ($N = 146$) or possible ($N = 148$) future self.

The general instruction was as follows: "In this part of the study, you will be asked to

reflect on your life and write a few short paragraphs about yourself. Your writing style can

influence your evaluation and enjoyment of the blog posts, so please write as much as you like in

your usual writing style." The writing prompt was varied for each condition and modeled after

the experimental procedures employed by Blouin-Hudon and Pychyl (2017), Schwarz and Clore

(1983), and Macrae et al. (2017). The prompt for participants in the positive affect condition is indicated in square brackets below, the negative affect condition with decorative brackets.

The writing prompt for the current self condition reads:

"Think of your life in the present. You are a current student at (university) this Autumn 2017 semester. Think about the [best]{worst} things that have happened in your life recently or are about to happen soon. Reflect on the biggest [joy]{disappointment} in your current life, and think about this [great]{terrible} experience in vivid details. Please spend 8-10 minutes writing about this [great]{terrible} experience in your current life. The Next button will appear after 8 minutes, and the page will automatically advance after 10 minutes. Describe the [positive]{negative} events in details, use first-person voice ('I had breakfast' instead of 'He/She had breakfast), and emphasize on how you feel. Be as specific as possible."

The writing prompt for the future self condition reads:

"Think of your life in the future. You already graduated from (university) and started working. Think about the [best]{worst} possible future that you can imagine for yourself. Reflect on what you [really hope]{are really afraid} would happen, and think about this [great]{terrible} future in vivid details. Please spend 8-10 minutes writing about this [great]{terrible} future. The Next button will appear after 8 minutes, and the page will automatically advance after 10 minutes. Describe the [positive]{negative} events in details, use first-person voice ('I had breakfast' instead of 'He/She had breakfast), and emphasize on how you feel. Be as specific as possible."

Stimuli

For the selective exposure session, online blog posts by recent alumni were chosen to

provide a realistic context in which participants can find messages featuring both upward and downward comparison targets who are similar to themselves, which facilitates social comparison (Festinger, 1954). The blog was modeled after real alumni blogs wherein graduates tell their personal stories and offer advice to current students (e.g., https://alumni.uga.edu/blog/). The blog's homepage made it clear the blog was from the participants' university by displaying the university's logo and a picture of the university's mascot. Participants were also told that the authors were recent graduates from their university, all of which serve to increase the perceived similarity between participants and the authors.

The blog's homepage (see Figure 2) also contained four tabs that labeled the categories of posts, corresponding to the four domains: career, finances, friendship, and romance. Underneath each tab, participants could see four post titles and leads that were related to that domain. A gender-neutral author name was paired with each post as well. Two titles and leads were written in a way that indicated the author was unsuccessful after college (downward targets), and the other two indicated the author was successful after college (upward targets). Participants could click the title of any post to read the full post. The text ranged from 610 to 635 words and explained in more detail how the author was either successful or unsuccessful in the life domain. At any point, participants could click a button on the bottom of the full post page to return to the blog's homepage and select another post to read.

All of the stimuli used in this study were pretested and described in an earlier study (Author, 2019) with a sample of undergraduate students from the same population. Specifically, all author names were judged to be gender-neutral, and the post leads and titles were perceived to fit with their respective life domain (romance, friendships, finances, or career; $N = 30$). The prior study also tested whether or not the full posts, leads, and titles clearly indicated that the authors

were failing or succeeding after college ($N = 104$). Participants were asked to respond to this statement: "The author of this post is successful in his/her [finances, career, friendships, romances]" on a scale of 1-*Strongly disagree* to 9-*Strongly agree*. The results showed the perceptions of success in the target domains for succeeding authors were significantly higher than for failing authors for all of the titles/leads and full texts.

For the purpose of the current study, an additional stimuli test was conducted to examine whether participants would perceive the successful authors as upward targets and the failing authors as downward targets. After reading each post, participants ($N = 114$) were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with two statements on a scale ranging from 1 to 9: "The author of the blog post is doing worse than me" and "The author of the blog post is doing better than me." The results showed that successful authors were perceived to be doing better than participants, and unsuccessful authors to be doing worse. Perceived similarity to the author was also measured on the same scale to ensure that the comparison targets were relevant to participants, and on average, participants reported $M = 5.84$ ($SD = 2.77$), which is higher than the mean of 5 on a 1-9 scale. The mean ratings ranged from $M = 4.04$ ($SD = .45$) for a downward comparison target in the finance domain to $M = 7.48$ ($SD = .49$) for an upward comparison target in the career domain. Appendix A reports the pretest results for the posts' titles and leads (what participants saw on the homepage), and Appendix B reports the pretest results for the posts' main texts (what participants read when they clicked on a post).

Measures

Social comparison via selective exposure. Participants were given five minutes for the selective exposure task and were able to make as many selections as they wanted. The software unobtrusively and automatically measured selective exposure to the blog posts in seconds for

each 15-second interval. On average, they selected $M = 5.45$ posts ($SD = 3.75$) and spent $M =$ 258.65s ($SD = 32.95$) reading them. Among the four domains, on average, participants selected $M = 1.98$ finance posts ($SD = .97$), $M = 1.21$ career posts ($SD = .96$), $M = 1.00$ romance posts ($SD = .92$), and $M = .79$ friendship posts ($SD = .84$).

On average, participants spent $M = 139.59$s ($SD = 87.19$) on upward comparison targets, $M = 119.07$s ($SD = 87.93$) on downward comparison targets, and $M = 50.17$s ($SD = 32.88$) on the homepage. Among the four domains, participants spent on average $M = 85.73$s ($SD = 74.50$) on career posts, $M = 81.06$s ($SD = 81.50$) on romance posts, $M = 48.85$s ($SD = 58.76$) on friendship posts, and $M = 43.01$s ($SD = 63.30$) on finance posts. Appendix C reports the descriptive statistics of exposure time to upward and downward comparison targets in each domain, as well as the time spent on the homepage and the total time spent for each condition. The sum of mean selective exposure time to both upward and downward targets in all domains, plus the time spent on the homepage, equals approximately 309 seconds for both conditions (after 300 seconds of browsing, a pop-up notification prompted participants to proceed to the post-test questionnaire, which took on average about 9 seconds).

Additionally, exposure time was also recorded in 15-second intervals to be used as repeated measures. In each 15-second period, the software logged how many seconds were spent on each post (ranging from 0s-participant did not spend any time on this post in this interval to 15s-participant spent the entire duration on this post and did not click on the homepage or another post). This procedure resulted in 20 repeated measures for selective exposure for each post. For each interval, the time spent on all upward comparison posts was aggregated. For example, if within a 15-second interval, a participant spent the first 4 seconds on a post featuring an upward comparison target in friendship, the next 6 seconds on the homepage, and the last 5

seconds on a post featuring an upward comparison target in career, the repeated measure for

upward comparison would record a value of 9, and the repeated measure for downward

comparison will record a value of 0.

As a validation of the social comparison processes assumed to occur during the selective

exposure, participants indicated the extent to which they engaged in social comparisons

embedded in evaluations for the blog posts. The validation was successful, as ratings for the item

"I compared myself to the authors of the blog post" (on a 7-point scale, 1-*Strongly disagree* and

7-*Strongly agree*) was positively correlated with overall post reading time, $r = .227$ ($p < .001$).

Furthermore, the item "The authors of the blog post were inspiring" was positively correlated

with selective exposure time for upward comparison targets, $r = .295$ ($p < .001$), but negatively

correlated with selective exposure time for downward comparison targets, $r = -.235$ ($p < .001$).

However, the analyses used selective exposure time as a behavioral, unobtrusive indicator for

social comparison processes, instead of relying on self-reports.

Post-exposure affect. After the selective exposure task, participants were asked to

indicate how angry, anxious, scared, frustrated, distressed, discouraged, motivated, hopeful,

inspired, lucky, grateful, and comforted they felt on a slider scale of 1-100. These items were

adopted from Aspinwall and Taylor (1993) because they were common responses to social

comparison processes. All items were included in the measurement model for affect in the

analyses for H2 and H3.

Self-perception. Participants' general and domain-specific self-perception were both

measured. For general self-perception, participants were asked to indicate how they felt about

their current life (from 1-*Extremely bad* to 100-*Extremely good*) and how they felt about their

current life compared to the average student (from 1-*Much worse than average* to 100-*Much*

better than average). This measure was also adopted from Aspinwall and Taylor (1993). The two items formed a reliable scale, Cronbach's α = .94. They were included in the measurement model for self-perception in the analysis for H2.

In each domain, participants were similarly asked to indicate how they felt about their current life, as well as how they felt they would compare to the average student in said domain using the same 1-100 scale. Each scale was internally consistent (romance: Cronbach's α = .91; friendship: Cronbach's α = .89; career: Cronbach's α = .85; and finance: Cronbach's α = .85). The items for each domain were included in the measurement model for said domain's self-perception in the analyses for H3.

Possible future self. Participants' possible future selves were only measured in each domain instead of globally because in Markus and Nurius (1986)'s conceptualization, possible selves are always domain-specific. Participants were asked to respond to the following items on a scale of 1-*Strongly disagree* to 100-*Strongly agree*: "In the future, I am *likely* to be [a person who has a successful romantic relationship][a person who has many good friends][a person who has a successful career][a person who is financially stable]" and "In the future, I *hope* to be [a person who has a successful romantic relationship][a person who has many good friends][a person who has a successful career][a person who is financially stable]." Thus, two items were used to measure possible future self in each domain, one for the hoped-for future self and one for the anticipated future self. Each scale was fairly reliable (romance: Cronbach's α = .58; friendship: Cronbach's α = .81; career: Cronbach's α = .60; and finance: Cronbach's α = .50). Lower reliability is acceptable for newly developed measures (Lance, Butts, & Michels, 2006), as possible selves were commonly measured by open-ended responses in previous studies (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Yowell, 2002). The items for each domain were included in

the measurement model for said domain's possible future self in the analyses for H3.

Global self-esteem. Because trait or global self-esteem is known to be related to social comparison patterns (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993, Cramer et al., 2016), it was considered as a covariate. Global self-esteem was measured at baseline using Rosenberg (1965)'s 10-item self-esteem scale. Participants responded on a scale of 1-*Strong disagree* to 7-*Strongly agree*. Sample items include "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "I certainly feel useless at times" (reverse coded). On average, participants reported a mean of $M = 4.68$ ($SD = .97$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$). See Appendix D for bivariate correlation coefficients of all measured variables.

Results

Manipulation Validation

A manipulation validation test was conducted with a separate sample of 114 participants in the same undergraduate population. They first engaged in the writing task, after which they were asked to report their level of the two self-evaluation motives proposed by the SESAM model to influence choices of social comparison targets – self-improvement and self-enhancement – using a scale developed by Gregg, Hepper, and Sedikides (2011). The scale was originally developed to measure individuals' *trait* self-evaluation motives, with 2 items for each motive on a scale of 1-*Strongly disagree* to 7-*Strongly agree*. For the purpose of this study, the items were modified to measure *state* self-evaluation and self-enhancement motives, including "Right now, I LIKE to hear that I can be a BETTER person" and "Right now, I WANT to discover that I can IMPROVE myself" for self-improvement and "Right now, I LIKE to hear that I am a GREAT person" and "Right now, I WANT to discover that I have EXCELLENT qualities" (capitalization in the original scale).

An MANOVA was conducted with affect and temporal self as the two experimental

factors, and state self-improvement and self-enhancement motives as the dependent variables. In terms of the self-improvement motive, participants who wrote about their future self ($M = 6.11$, $SD = .86$) reported significantly higher levels of the self-improvement motive than those who wrote about their current self ($M = 5.77$, $SD = .93$), $F(1, 110) = 4.08$, $p = .046$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Valence of affect did not have the same impact, $F(1, 110) = .005$, $p = .94$, partial $\eta^2 = 0$, nor did the interaction effect, $F(1, 110) = 1.44$, $p = .23$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. On the other hand, state self-enhancement motive was not influenced by either of the two experimental manipulations (temporal self: $F(1, 110) = .015$, $p = .904$, partial $\eta^2 = 0$; affect: $F(1, 110) = .319$, $p = .574$, partial $\eta^2 = 0$). Thus, the temporal self manipulation successfully made an impact on state self-improvement motive whereas the affect manipulation did not. State self-enhancement motive did not vary by experimental conditions.

Temporal Self & Valence Impacts on Selective Exposure to Upward Comparison Targets

H1 proposed that thoughts about possible future self would foster upward social comparison via selective exposure. RQ1 asked if valence of affect would similarly impact selective exposure to upward comparison targets. A repeated measure Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was run with temporal self (current vs. future) and valence of affect (positive vs. negative) as the between-group factors, time as the within-subject factor, and the selective exposure time to upward comparison targets in each 15-second interval served as the repeated measures. Global self-esteem, and time spent on the homepage served as the covariates. Time spent on the homepage was included to account for the variation in the amount of time participants actually spent reading the blog posts. This covariate is commonly used in current selective exposure studies (e.g., Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014) to control for error variance stemming from reading styles and speed.

Overall, the result showed a significant effect from temporal self, $F(1, 286) = 5.62$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Participants who were primed with their possible future self spent more time reading posts from upward social comparison targets ($M = 148.80$, $SD = 87.85$) than those who were primed with their current self ($M = 130.37$, $SD = 85.84$). Consistent with the manipulation check results, the affect manipulation did not have an impact on selective exposure time, $F(1, 286) = .68$, $p = .41$, nor did it interact with time, Wilks' Lambda $= .94$, $F(19, 268) = .99$, $p = .48$. As seen in Figure 3, participants in the future self condition selectively spent more time on upward comparison targets than those in the present self condition, and this effect did not differ across time, Wilks' Lambda $= .96$, $F(19, 268) = .53$, $p = .95$. Thus, H1 was supported.

Impacts of Selective Exposure to Social Comparison Targets

H2 suggested that the positive impact of future self on post-exposure general self-perception (H2a) and affect (H2b) would be mediated via selective exposure time to upward comparison targets. RQ2 asked if the effect of positive affect, if such an effect exists, is mediated in the same way. To test this hypothesis and answer this research question, we used structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimates. Measurement models for *general self-perception* and *affect* were included, and the affect manipulation, global self-esteem, and time spent on the homepage served as a covariate (not shown in the model for readability). A model with all affect items (negative affect items reverse coded) loading on one factor was first run and showed poor fit, $\chi^2(138) = 1287.33$, $p < .001$, CFI $= .72$, RMSEA $= .10$ (90% CI: .10 – .01), SRMR $= .14$. A subsequent model was run with a two-factor measurement model for affect: a positive affect factor and a negative affect factor. This model fits the data well, $\chi^2(136) = 300.859$, $p < .001$, CFI $= .92$, RMSEA $= .06$ (90% CI: .05 – .07), SRMR $= .06$. As predicted, participants in the future self condition spent more time on upward comparison targets, $\beta = .22$,

SE = .05, *t* = 4.20, *p* < .001. Upward social comparison in turn led to more positive general self-perception, β = .14, *SE* = .06, *t* = 2.44, *p* = .01, and more positive affect, β = .49, *SE* = .15, *t* = 3.26, *p* = .001. The indirect effect from temporal self to general self-perception via upward social comparison was significant, β = .03, *SE* = .01, *t* = 2.09, *p* = .04, as was the indirect effect on affect, β = .11, *SE* = .04, *t* = 2.55, *p* = .01. Thus, both H2a and H2b were supported.

On the other hand, consistent with the results of the repeated measure ANCOVA used to test H1 and RQ1, the affect manipulation did not make an impact on upward social comparison, β = .05, *SE* = .05, *t* = .97, *p* = .33. The indirect effects were therefore not significant on either general self-perception (β = .01, *SE* = .01, *t* = .90, *p* = .37) or post-exposure affect (β = -.01, *SE* = .01, *t* = -.94, *p* = .35). All path coefficients are reported in Figure 4. Appendix F reports the direct, indirect, and total effects of these mediation models.

H3 proposed that the effect of selective exposure to upward social comparison targets in (a) romance, (b) friendship, (c) career, and (d) finance on individuals' possible future selves in the same life domains will be mediated by their domain-specific self-perception. Four structural equation models were run to test this hypothesis (see Appendix E). To address the type I error inflation due to multiple comparison tests, we applied the Bonferroni correction formula (Shaffer, 1995) to calculate an adjusted alpha level by dividing the conventional alpha level (.05) by the number of tests (4). Thus, the alpha level for the following tests were set at .0125. Measurement models for *domain-specific self-perception* and *possible future self* were included, and the temporal self and the affect manipulations, global self-esteem, and time spent in each domain served as covariates (not shown in the model for readability). All four models showed excellent fit: romance: χ^2 (11) = 10.66, *p* = .47, CFI = 1, RMSEA = 0 (90% CI: .00 – .06), SRMR = .03; friendship: χ^2 (11) = 12.20, *p* = .35, CFI = 1, RMSEA = .02 (90% CI: .00 – .07), SRMR =

.03; career: χ^2 (11) = 13.11, p = .29, CFI = 1, RMSEA = .03 (90% CI: .00 – .07), SRMR = .03;

and finance: χ^2 (11) = 12.21, p = .35, CFI = 1, RMSEA = .02 (90% CI: .00 – .07), SRMR = .03.

However, among the four domains, only in romance (β = .24, SE = .07, t = 3.34, p = .001)

and friendship (β = .29, SE = .09, t = 3.19, p = .001) were the paths between upward comparison

exposure time and domain-specific self-perception significant. Self-perception in turn predicted

possible future self for romance (β = .49, SE = .08, t = 6.50, p < .001) and friendship (β = .60, SE

= .05, t = 12.09, p < .001). In the other two domains, although more positive self-perception

always led to more positive possible future self (career: β = .44, SE = .07, t = 6.60, p < .001;

finance: β = .36, SE = .07, t = 4.96, p < .001), exposure time to upward comparison target was

not predictive of self-perception. As a result, the indirect effects from upward comparison to

possible future self via domain-specific self-perception are only significant in the domains of

romance (β = .12, SE = .04, t = 2.94, p = .003) and friendship (β = .17, SE = .06, t = 3.06, p =

.002). Thus, the findings provided support for H3a /b but not H3/c/d. All path coefficients are

reported in Appendix E. Appendix F reports the direct, indirect, and total effects of the mediation

models for the romance and friendship domains.

Discussion

The current study investigated the roles of the working self and valence of affect on

individuals' selective exposure motivations and behaviors, as indicated by time spent on upward

comparison targets, as well as the influence of upward social comparison on individuals' post-

exposure self-evaluation, affect, and possible future self. Specifically, H1 postulated that future

self increases selective exposure time to upward comparison targets compared to current self.

RQ1 asked if valence of affect serves a similar role. After exposure, upward social comparison

was expected to mediate the effect from temporal self on post-exposure general self-perception

(H2a) and affect (H2b). The results showed support for H1; participants who were primed to

think of their future self spent more time on blog posts featuring upward comparison targets

compared to those who were primed to think about their current self. However, affect impacted

neither the self-improvement motive nor selective exposure to upward comparison targets. This

selective exposure time in turn positively influenced participants' general self-perception and

affect post-exposure. Thus, selective exposure to upward comparison targets mediated the

relationship between temporal self and post-exposure general self-perception and affect,

providing full support for H2a and H2b.

Additionally, H3 predicted that selective exposure time in each domain promotes positive

self-perception in said domain, which in turn fosters participants' possible selves for (a)

romance, (b) friendship, (c) career, and (d) finance, indicating the hypothesized reciprocal

relationship between the self and media use. This hypothesis received partial support because

domain-specific postulations in H3a/b were supported, whereas those in H3c/d were not.

Overall, the findings demonstrated the role of the working self on selective exposure

motivations and behaviors: As expected, participants who were primed to think about themselves

in the future exhibited a self-improvement motive, which in turn led them to spend more time on

upward comparison targets, compared to those who were primed to think about themselves in the

present. Thus, the study provides experimental evidence for the impact of the temporal self on

the self-improvement motive, and subsequently on selection of comparison targets in a mediated

context. These results demonstrate that media users select comparison targets and engage in

social comparison in a goal-oriented fashion, and that media messages provide a meaningful way

for users to satisfy their self-related motives. This finding carries two important implications for

research in communication in general and media psychology in particular. First, it establishes

that the working self – the state component of the self – has direct influence on media use. Because the self-related motivations are fundamental and ever-present yet responsive to external situations, they function as dynamic motives to drive media use across contexts and genres, making them an important and worthwhile topic for future research. Second, it shows that media users do select media messages containing comparison targets to manage their self-concepts instead of just habitually consuming them. This phenomenon could be an important factor for explaining why social media use, which features a wide variety of comparison targets often with more extreme levels of successes and failures compared to a non-mediated context, is becoming an increasingly predominant activity in people's lives (Perrin, 2015).

Further, upward social comparison with the self-improvement motive, as predicted, led to more positive post-exposure general self-perception and affect. These results suggest a buffering role of the self-improvement motive on upward comparison: By focusing on future improvement and learning useful information, participants gained positive self-perception and affect, instead of feeling inferior and deflated. In contrast to many studies in both communication and psychology which showed that feeling deflated is the dominant response after upward comparison (Gerber et al., 2018; Hanna et al., 2017), this finding demonstrates that upward comparison can and does have positive impacts when individuals look to the targets for improvement instead of assessment. Motivations, then, influence not only selection of targets (media selection) but also outcomes of comparison (media effects), consistent with previous findings (Collins, 1996; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2005).

Valence of affect, on the other hand, did not influence the self-improvement motive nor selective exposure pattern in participants. This lack of significant results may indicate that affect may not play a role in predicting social comparison via selective exposure. However, this claim

contradicts the results found in Johnson and Knobloch-Westerwick (2014), which showed that negative mood prompted people to engage more with downward comparison targets compared to positive mood. Alternatively, it is possible that though negative affect consistently induces a self-enhancement motive and downward comparison, the impact of positive affect is more complex. It can sometimes serve as a resource for people to engage with negative and self-threatening information to improve themselves, whereas at other times it prompts people to be more cautious and avoid this type of information to preserve the positive mood (per the hedonic contingency hypothesis, Wegener & Petty, 1994). Therefore, it may be worthwhile for future research to investigate the moderators of affect's impact on selective exposure and media use.

Finally, selective exposure to upward comparison targets in two domains, romance and friendship, was shown to foster possible future selves via domain-specific self-perception. This finding suggests the reciprocal relationship between media use and the self: The temporal self impacted selective exposure to upward comparison targets, and upward comparison influenced not only how people think about themselves right now but also how they envision their future. However, the same mediation effect was not found for the domains of career and finance: Despite current self-perception being a significant predictor of possible future self, selective exposure time to the mediated targets did not impact domain-specific self-perception. The nature of the domains may help explain this discrepancy. Festinger (1954) posited that people's tendency to socially compare is stronger in domains without an objective standard. Taylor et al. (1995) further elaborated that in social life, objective information is usually less available, and people may instead rely more on social comparison. Thus, the mediation effect was significant in romance and friendship but not in career and finance possibly because people have a stronger tendency to engage in social comparison to evaluate themselves in these relational domains.

After all, monetary categories provide more objective comparisons regarding career and finance, which renders social comparisons less relevant.

This pattern of results provides support for some of the key tenets of the SESAM model. Understanding media users' working self and self-evaluation motives will allow us to better predict their selective exposure behaviors and how the messages will affect them, not only for social media messages but for other communication contexts. Research in both media effects and communication campaigns would be well-served to explore this topic. For media effects research, it would be worthwhile to understand what type of audience is more drawn to what types of messages based on their self-evaluation motives, and how message impacts can vary depending on motivations for exposure. For communication campaigns research, the results shed light on how to optimize the use of role models in media interventions so that the messages are attractive (selection) and inspiring instead of deflating (effects) to the audience. Messages that guide the audience to envision themselves in the future, feel closer to their future selves, or think about the long-term benefits to their future selves are likely to be more effective. The audience is more likely to engage with the messages, and exposure is more likely to be effective in prompting more positive self-perception and affect, thus facilitating learning from the role models and improvement.

Limitations of this study include the use of an undergraduate student sample, limited media choices in the selective exposure task, a small effect size of the manipulation, the lack of measures for the other self-evaluation motives, and inconsistent results across domains. First, although the use of an undergraduate student sample is common in social sciences studies, it does limit the generalizability of the results to other populations. However, as the study focused on selective exposure to, and the effects of engaging with, upward comparison targets, it

necessitated stimuli featuring people similar to participants to facilitate social comparison, and thus using a specific, non-representative sample. Likewise, despite the media choices presented here being only a small and non-random subset of all available media messages, they represent realistic options that participants may encounter in real life on social media platforms while simultaneously being designed and optimized for social comparison. Regardless, studies using other populations and stimuli customized for them can help increase the generalizability of the current findings.

Although the manipulation checks showed significant differences in the level of the self-improvement motive between the current and the future self conditions, the effect size observed in the validation test was relatively small. This is to be expected, however, as self-report measures of motivations are "limited to people's conscious understanding of their own psychological states and can further be biased by social desirability concerns" (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2014, p. 329), and self-improvement is a highly socially desirable motivation. Further, despite this small effect, different selection patterns of social comparison targets were still observed in the main study. As choices between courses of action are considered a type of behavioral measure of motivations (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2014), these selective exposure patterns also served as an indicator of the self-improvement motive, providing additional validation for the measure. Nonetheless, future studies should explore different and potentially stronger self-improvement motive manipulations. Relatedly, the manipulation validation test included measures for the self-improvement and the self-enhancement motives, as they are the two self-evaluation motivations proposed by the SESAM model to impact selective exposure to social comparison targets. Two other self-evaluation motivations, the self-assessment and self-consistency motives, were not measured because they were outside the scope of the theoretical

framework. However, they can still potentially influence the selection and processing of social comparison targets. Future studies should measure the effects of the manipulation on all four self-evaluation motives to get a fuller picture of the mechanism at play.

Lastly, the effect of selective exposure to upward comparison targets on possible future self via self-perception was not consistent across domains. Future research may explore the potential moderators that can account for the differences between domains such as domain importance, domain self-efficacy, or preexisting self-perception in the domain. In doing so, we can better understand how the self-improvement motive interacts with individual characteristics to influence media selection and effects. A longitudinal or prolonged exposure design can further help examine the long-term cumulative impact of media use on the self and more fully demonstrate their reciprocal relationship.

As long as the media present the audience with a wide array of social comparison targets, research into how people select and socially compare with these portrayals, and how the comparisons in turn influence their self-concepts, can make important contributions to both the selective exposure and the media effects literature. The present findings give strong credence to the notion that individuals manage their working self and fulfill their self-evaluation motives through selective exposure to mediated messages, via social comparisons, in line with the SESAM model.

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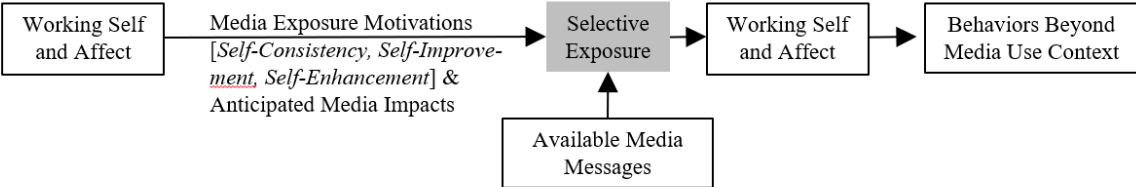
SESAM Model (general)

| Working Self and Affect | → Media Exposure Motivations [*Self-Consistency, Self-Improvement, Self-Enhancement*] & Anticipated Media Impacts → | Selective Exposure | → | Working Self and Affect | → | Behaviors Beyond Media Use Context |

Available Media Messages
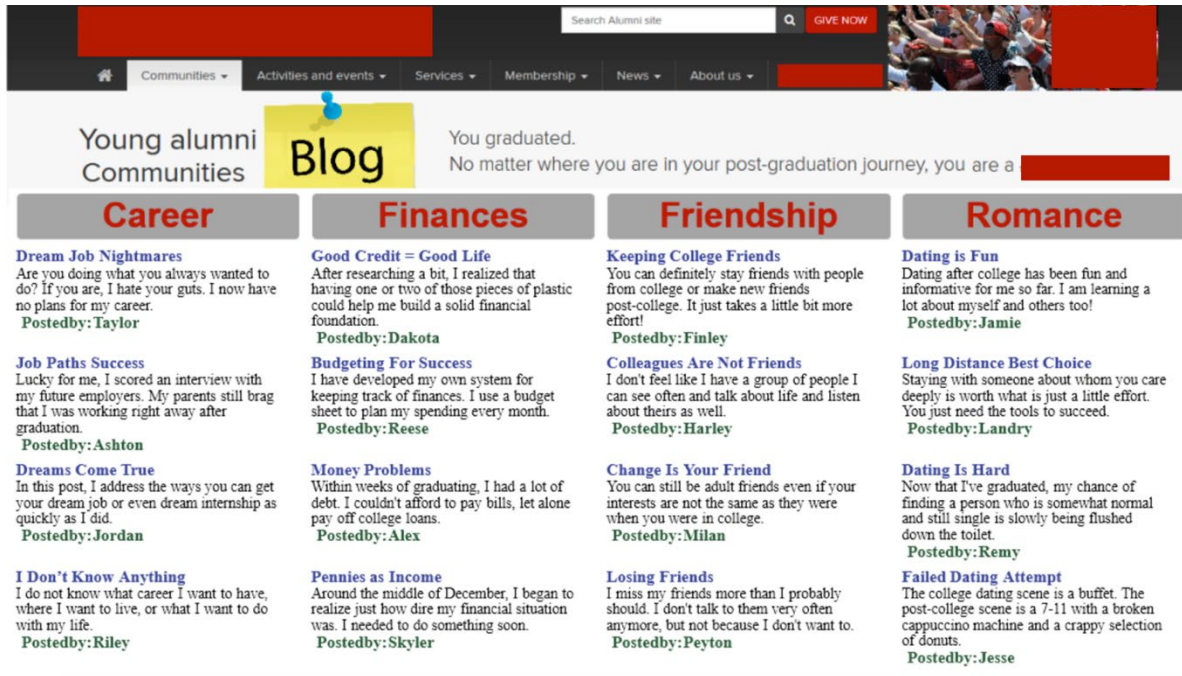
Figure 1. The SESAM model

Figure 2. The blog homepage; university-related images have been obscured for blind review.
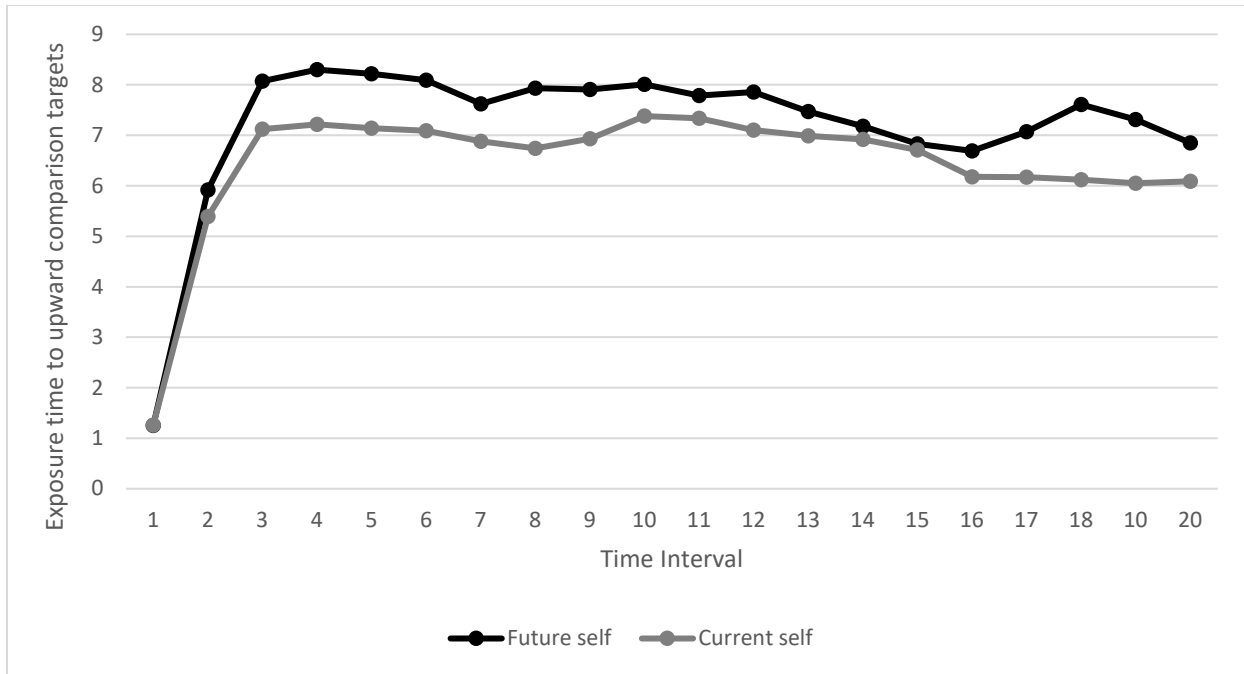
Figure 3. The effect of temporal self on upward social comparison via selective exposure time as

predicted in H1

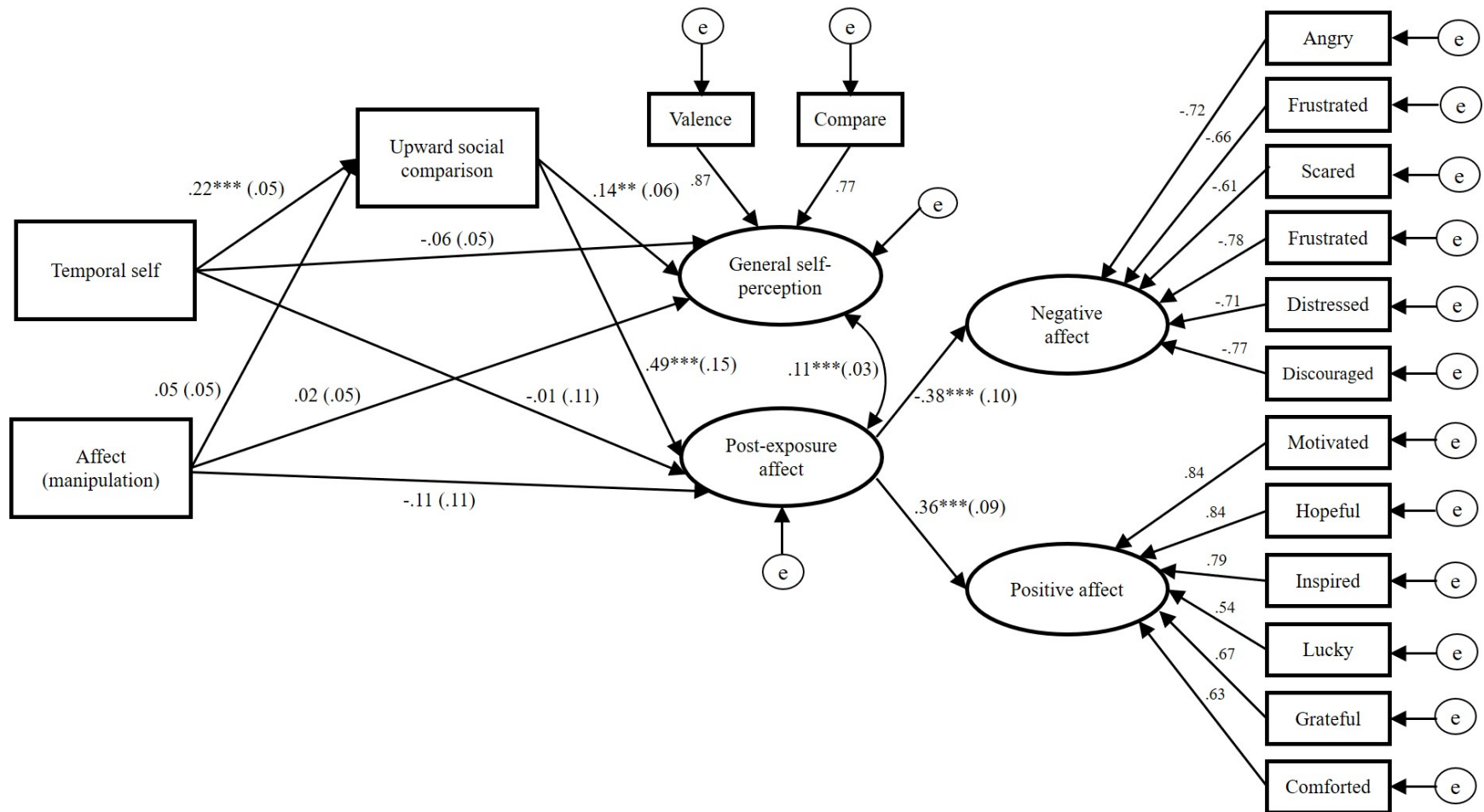*Note*. Each interval is 15 seconds long.

Figure 4. Structural equation model between affect, temporal self, upward social comparison, general self-perception, and post-exposure affect (testing H2 & RQ2)

Note.   Temporal self: current self coded as 0; Affect manipulation: negative affect coded as 0

  p < .05   **p* < .01   ***p* < .001

Appendix A

Stimuli Test Results Regarding Perceptions of Titles and Leads as Portraying Successful vs. Unsuccessful Individuals and Life Domain Fit

	Life Domain Fit	Success in the Life Domain	
		M	*SD*
Romance: Downward 1	100%	2.94[a]	1.71
Romance: Downward 2	100%	4.00[a]	2.21
Romance: Upward 1	93.5%	7.13[b]	1.84
Romance: Upward 2	97.0%	7.39[b]	1.80
Friendship: Downward 1	93.5%	3.35[a]	1.92
Friendship: Downward 2	87.1%	3.81[a]	2.40
Friendship: Upward 1	96.9%	7.44[b]	1.97
Friendship: Upward 2	97.1%	7.82[b]	1.66
Career: Downward 1	96.8%	3.10[a]	1.87
Career: Downward 2	100%	3.32[a]	2.07
Career: Upward 1	96.9%	7.41[b]	2.08
Career: Upward 2	100%	8.18[b]	1.45
Finance: Downward 1	96.8%	4.16[a]	2.38
Finance: Downward 2	93.5%	4.29[a]	2.47
Finance: Upward 1	100%	8.15[b]	1.73
Finance: Upward 2	88.6%	8.06[b]	1.63

Note. Subscripts denote significant differences at *p* < .05; these data were previously reported in Author (2019).

Appendix B

Stimuli Tests Results Regarding Perceptions of Blog Posts as Portraying Upward vs. Downward Comparison Targets

	Doing worse than me		Doing better than me		Perceived Similarity		Success in the Domain	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Romance: Downward 1	5.89[a]	2.82	4.24[a]	2.00	5.10[a]	2.97	3.95[a]	1.88
Romance: Downward 2	6.05[a]	1.91	4.05[a]	1.53	6.00[a]	2.71	3.83[a]	2.71
Romance: Upward 1	3.38[b]	1.88	7.24[b]	1.58	5.14[a]	2.49	8.29[b]	1.52
Romance: Upward 2	3.94[b]	1.75	6.39[b]	1.83	6.00[a]	2.77	7.65[b]	1.61
Friendship: Downward 1	6.67[a]	2.35	4.08[a]	2.10	4.29[a]	2.90	3.75[a]	2.40
Friendship: Downward 2	5.08[b]	2.72	4.13[a]	2.03	4.75[ab]	2.94	4.76[a]	2.89
Friendship: Upward 1	3.58[c]	2.23	6.54[b]	2.11	6.75[b]	2.75	7.56[b]	1.65
Friendship: Upward 2	3.17[c]	1.59	5.48[b]	1.70	5.74[ab]	2.01	8.35[b]	1.61
Career: Downward 1	5.86[a]	2.82	5.13[a]	2.26	6.26[ab]	2.85	4.95[a]	2.30
Career: Downward 2	5.61[a]	2.11	4.00[a]	1.86	5.17[b]	2.89	3.82[a]	2.77
Career: Upward 1	2.61[b]	1.56	6.87[b]	2.88	7.48[a]	2.33	7.64[b]	1.62
Career: Upward 2	3.00[b]	2.20	6.96[b]	2.40	6.83[ab]	2.74	8.29[b]	1.15
Finance: Downward 1	6.13[a]	2.68	4.63[a]	2.37	6.58[a]	3.13	4.76[a]	3.02
Finance: Downward 2	6.38[a]	2.57	3.75[a]	1.60	4.04[b]	2.22	3.81[a]	2.23
Finance: Upward 1	4.04[b]	2.21	6.87[b]	1.94	7.13[a]	2.16	8.19[b]	1.21
Finance: Upward 2	3.43[b]	1.67	6.96[b]	1.87	6.17[a]	1.75	7.95[b]	1.46

Note. Superscripts denote significant differences at $p < .05$ within column and life domain; the "Success in the Domain" data were previously reported in Author (2019).

Appendix C

Descriptive Statistics for Selective Exposure Time(s) by Life Domains (n = 292)

| | Life Domain | | | | | | | | Total | |
| | Romance | | Friendship | | Career | | Finance | | | |
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Future Self Condition										
Upward Comparisons	40.59	60.98	30.40	47.88	48.50	60.68	29.31	51.43	148.80	87.85
Downward Comparisons	38.54	60.40	17.00	36.24	38.63	56.50	13.78	36.72	107.96	88.66
Homepage									52.17	36.59
Total time spent	79.13	6.43	47.40	4.82	87.13	6.09	43.10	4.95	308.93	1.78
Current Self Condition										
Upward Comparisons	33.11	53.74	31.86	44.92	41.43	54.90	23.96	48.63	130.37	85.84
Downward Comparisons	49.88	71.09	18.44	39.94	42.89	57.72	18.97	42.03	130.17	86.07
Homepage									48.17	28.69
Total Time Spent	82.99	7.07	50.30	4.92	84.32	6.26	42.92	5.53	308.71	1.94

Appendix D

Bivariate Correlation Coefficients Between Measures

|	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1) Upward comparison time	-										
2) Global self-esteem	.32***	-									
3) General self-perception	.32***	.60***	-								
4) Post-exposure affect	.34***	.49***	.56***	-							
5) Self-perception – romance	.23***	.28***	.38***	.30***	-						
6) Self-perception – friendship	.21***	.34***	.49***	.40***	.27***	-					
7) Self-perception – career	.23***	.42***	.63***	.39***	.30***	.34***	-				
8) Self-perception – finance	.10	.31***	.50***	.34***	.27***	.31***	.55***	-			
9) Possible self – romance	.28***	.40***	.41***	.37***	.58***	.28***	.31***	.14*	-		
10) Possible self – friendship	.31***	.34***	.45***	.37***	.18**	.62***	.24***	.20**	.44***	-	
11) Possible self – career	.21***	.45***	.58***	.36***	.24***	.25***	.58***	.37***	.52***	.48***	-
12) Possible self – finance	.15*	.42***	.48***	.34***	.18**	.17**	.52***	.39***	.47***	.37***	.77***

*Note. *$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

Appendix E1
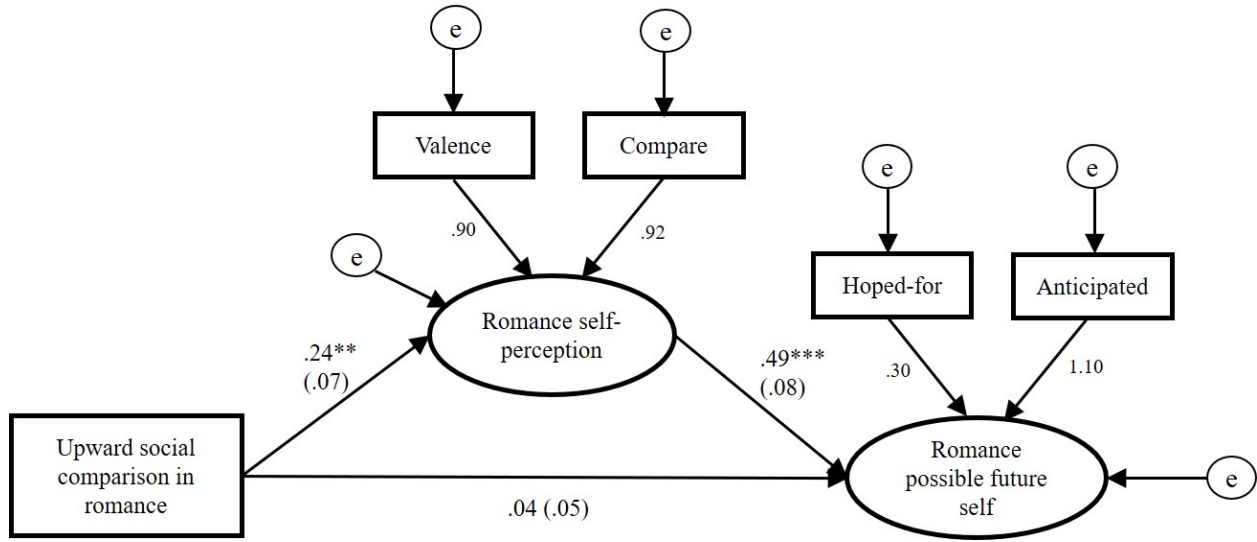
Structural equation model between upward social comparison in romance, romance self-perception, and romance possible future self (testing H3a)
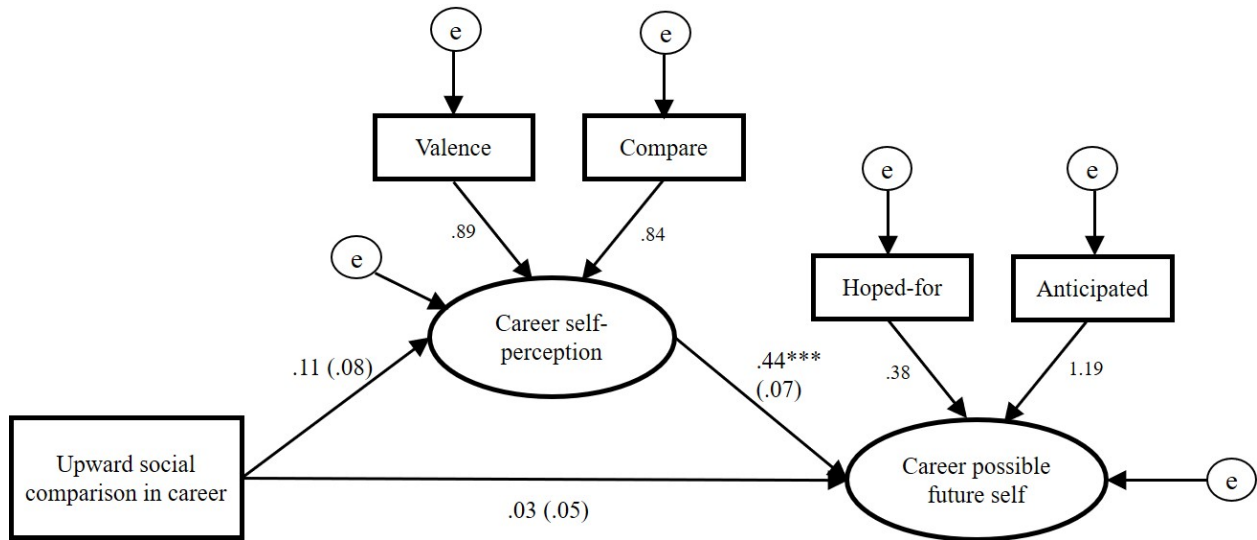
Note. *p < .05   **p < .01   ***p < .001

Appendix E2
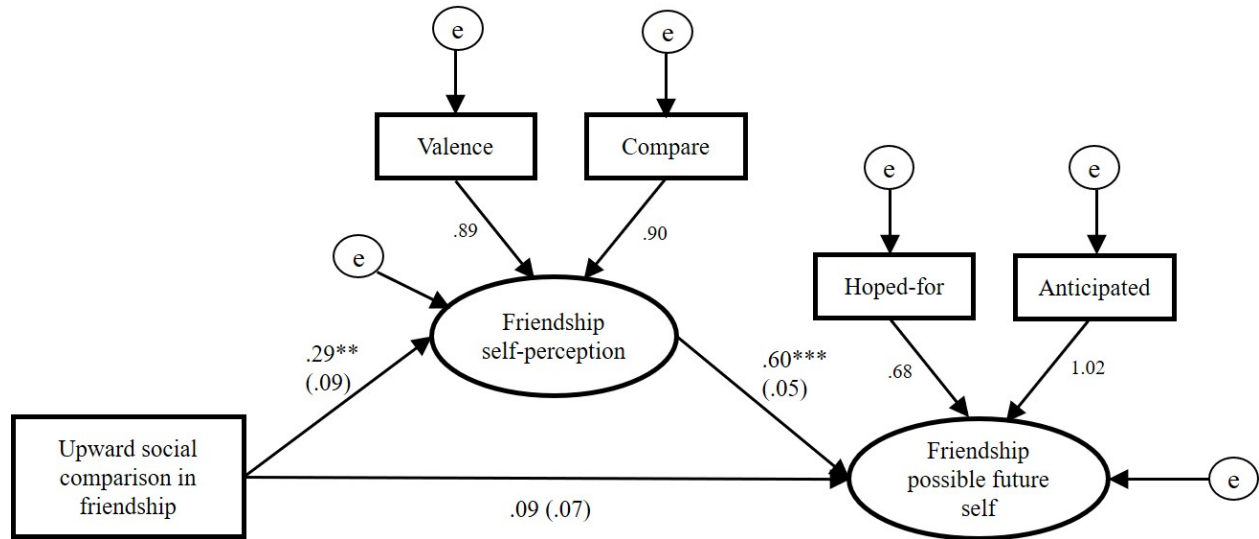
Structural equation model between upward social comparison in friendship, friendship self-perception, and friendship possible future self (testing H3b)
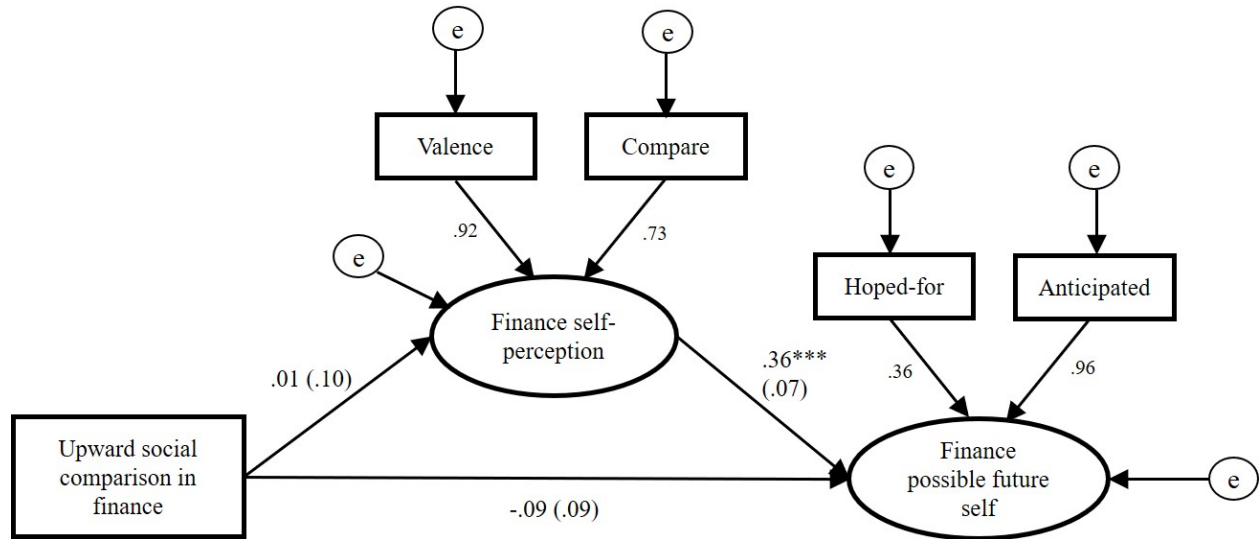
Note. *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Appendix E3

Structural equation model between upward social comparison in career, career self-perception, and career possible future self (testing H3c)

Note. *p* < .05   **p* < .01   ****p* < .001

Appendix E4

Structural equation model between upward social comparison in finance, finance self-perception,

and finance possible future self (testing H3c)

Note. *p < .05   **p < .01   ***p < .001

Appendix F

Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of the Structural Equation Models testing H2, RQ2 and H3

	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
H2			
Temporal self on self-perception via upward comparison	-.07 (.06)	.03* (.01)	-.04 (.05)
Temporal self on post-exposure affect via upward comparison	-.01 (0.11)	.11* (.04)	.10 (.11)
Affect on self-perception via upward comparison	.02 (.05)	.01 (.01)	.03 (.05)
Affect on post-exposure affect via upward comparison	.03 (.03)	-.01 (.01)	.02 (.03)
H3			
Upward comparison on possible future self via self-perception (romance)	.04 (.05)	.12** (.04)	.16* (.06)
Upward comparison on possible future self via self-perception (friendship)	.09 (.07)	.17** (.06)	.26** (.08)
Upward comparison on possible future self via self-perception (career)	.03 (.05)	.05 (.04)	.08 (.06)
Upward comparison on possible future self via self-perception (finance)	-.09 (.09)	.01 (.04)	-.09 (.09)

Note. *$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$