Johnson Publishing Company's Tan Confessions and Ebony: Reader Response through the Lens of Social Comparison Theory

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Malika S. Bryant

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MALIKA S. BRYANT

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and the Scripps College of Communication by

Aimee Edmondson

Professor of Journalism

Scott Titsworth

Dean, Scripps College of Communication

Abstract

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Director of Thesis: Aimee Edmondson

In November 1945, Johnson Publishing Company released its second publication titled *Ebony*, a magazine modeled after *Life* magazine, which featured photographic spreads and stories about various topics about the Black community. Five years later, the publishing company released *Tan Confessions*, an African American confessions magazine inspired by *True Confessions,* printed from November 1950 through October 1952. The magazine was renamed *TAN* and rebranded into a homemaker's magazine. This research analyzes the content of these magazines and 619 letters to the editor— 350 letters from volumes one and two of *Ebony* and 269 letters from volumes one and two of *Tan Confessions.* The study looks at the magazine content and letters to the editor through the theoretical lenses of social comparison theory to examine how the editors of *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* published and categorized letters to the editor, which serves as a representation how they presented reader reaction to their audience. This research is relevant and important to not only the history of Black magazine publication, but it is an essential piece of the rich and longstanding American magazine history. Johnson Publishing Company created an empire by printing a succession of high-circulating magazines that were unlike any before them because they published aspects of African American life that were not seen in mainstream media at the time.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the 1952 *Negro Year Book*, a publication released by the Tuskegee Institute's Department of Records and Research, *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* were the two most widely-circulated African American magazines in 1952.[1] Although both publications saw success, the futures of the magazines panned out in different ways. Both *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* were products of Johnson Publishing Company (JPC), which was founded by pioneering editor and publisher John H. Johnson.

In this research, social comparison theory will be used in analyzing and discussing the Letters to the Editor sections of *Ebony, Tan Confessions* and *TAN,* in order to reach some conclusions about the audience reaction to the content during the first two years of publication. This research will also take an in depth look at the content, including articles, common themes found in the letters to the editor and advertising to try to understand why *Ebony* flourished and why *Tan Confessions* did not continue after its second year. In late 1952, *Tan Confessions* was renamed *TAN* and was rebranded as a homemaker's magazine, although it featured similar content.

This study analyzes the first two volumes (years) of *Ebony* from November 1945 - November 1947, two volumes of *Tan Confessions* from November 1950 - October 1952, and the third volume, renamed *TAN* from November 1952-October 1953. These years were selected because they represent the earliest years of the publication and will provide a look into how the magazines began, how they were initially perceived by the

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[1] Jessie Parkhurst Guzman, Lewis W. Jones and Woodrow Hall. *1952 Negro Year Book: A Review of Events Affecting Negro Life.* Issued by the Department of Records and Research, Tuskegee Institute. (New York: WM. H. Wise & Co., Inc., 1952), 35.

readers in beginning and how the magazines evolved and were perceived by the audience as they became more popular and widely circulated. In total, the study looks at 619 letters to the editor— 350 letters from volumes one and two of *Ebony* and 269 letters from volumes one and two of *Tan Confessions*. In order to measure the audience reaction from the 619 letters to the editor, the researcher created a five-point scale, which included the following values: Very Positive, Somewhat Positive, Neutral, Somewhat Negative and Very Negative. After all letters were assigned a value, the results were recorded in a spreadsheet that organized the data according to the magazine name, volume number, issue number, publication date, letter title, letter writer's name, letter writer's location, letter writer's gender and the letter's writers reaction measured according to the researcher's five-point scale.

The study also includes a close reading and analysis of the content included in both publications through social comparison theory to further examine the letters to the editor published in *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*. The letters published served as a representation of how magazine editors presented the reader reaction to their content because editors selected, edited and published a sample of the letters that were received. The researcher read a selection of the articles from both magazines but created a spreadsheet listing all content from the publications analyzed. The content spreadsheets included a total of 526 articles for *Ebony* and 433 articles for *Tan Confessions*, and were organized according to the magazine name, volume number, issue number, publication date, article title and the subject of the article.

As a part of this historical analysis, this thesis also utilizes articles and internal company documents from the Ben Burns Paper Collection, which is housed at the Chicago Public Library. Burns, a White editor known for his work in predominately African American publications, worked for Johnson Publishing Company from 1938 to 1954.

Before sharing the findings/results and discussing the findings, the literature review of the thesis will provide an overview of social comparison theory; a history of the American press, including letters to the editor, confession magazines; *Life* and *True Story* magazines, which inspired *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*; a brief history of the African American press, including both newspapers and magazines; and *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions.* First, this thesis will introduce John H. Johnson as the mastermind behind JPC, *Ebony, Jet* and *Tan Confessions*, who was able to build the most successful empire in the history of Black publications. By 1955, JPC had a staff of more than 100 and its multiple profitable magazines had a combined circulation of 2.6 million.[2]

"I Learned how to Work Before I Learned How to Play."

The story behind the establishment of JPC and its many successful publications can be described as a remarkable example of what it means to know your audience and using unwavering belief to follow your dreams. This would pay off for Johnson as his publishing company and its many successful publications would later come to be described by Carolyn Kitch, author *of Pages from the Past: History & Memory in*

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[2] Ben Burns, *Nitty Gritty: A White Editor in Black Journalism*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996, 19.

American Magazines, as "the most commercially and culturally successful African American magazine empire of the twentieth century."[3] Not only was Johnson successful in the publishing arena, but he would go on to establish other successful business ventures. Johnson became a guru for companies who wanted to reach Black consumers and he produced multiple educational, written materials on the topic, as well as two films, *There's Gold In Your Backyard* and *The Secret of Selling the Negro*. Johnson Publishing Company went on to create a traveling fashion show called Fashion Fair, along with a company called Fashion Fair Cosmetics, a book division, and acquired three radio stations.[4] The year 2020 marked 75 years since the publication of the first issue of *Ebony* and although it is no longer being printed, Johnson Publishing Company's legacy has been documented and celebrated through its expansive *Ebony* and *Jet* photo archive at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

Growing up in Arkansas City, Arkansas, during the Jim Crow Era, in the 1920s and 1930s, Johnson could have never imagined the future that awaited him as a leading pioneer in publishing Black magazines. Johnson's mother, Gertrude, was a cook and domestic worker for White families and his stepfather, James, who she married one year after Johnson's father was killed in a sawmill accident, worked in levee camps along the Mississippi River.[5] Although Johnson's family was poor, he never went without

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[3] Carolyn Kitch. *Pages from the Past: History & Memory in American Magazines.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005, 89.
[4] John H. Johnson and Lerone Bennett Jr. *Succeeding Against the Odds*. (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 230.
[5] Ibid., 40-41.

necessities such as food and clothing, and he often helped his mother and stepfather with work. “I was a working child,” he said in his autobiography, titled *Succeeding Against the Odds.* “I learned how to work before I learned how to play.” [6]

Johnson, who always had an interest in journalism growing up, said the first newspaper he remembered, which inspired his future work as a publisher and editor, was the African American owned and published newspaper *The Chicago Defender*.[7] For the first time, Johnson was able to read about the growing opportunities and developments for Black people in northern cities and felt what he described as an “intellectual and physical thrill” when he read the newspaper.[8] Established in 1905 by Robert S. Abbott, *The Chicago Defender* was a pioneering publication in many ways. The newspaper became known for using bold and attention-grabbing headlines and printing honest and explicit news stories of violence, crime and mistreatment of Black people in the South.[9] However, the *Chicago Defender* was also a beacon of hope for many. The newspaper is credited as being one of the biggest sources of education and encouragement during the mass movement of African Americans from southern to northern states in the 1900s, which is known as the Great Migration. Abbott’s way of reporting was different from other Black publications at the time, but it was embraced by the Black audience

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Margena A. Christian. *Empire: The House That John H. Johnson Built, The Life & Legacy of Pioneering Publishing Magnate.* (Chicago: DocM.A.C. Write Publishing, 2018), 42.
[8] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 47.
[9] Charles A. Simmons. *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage During National Crises, with Special Reference to Four Black Newspapers, 1827-1965*. (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, 1998), 7.

nationally and the newspaper had some of the largest circulation figures ever attained by a Black newspaper.[10]

Johnson attended Arkansas City Colored School during his elementary years but after eighth grade, the educational opportunities for Johnson were insubstantial. The Arkansas City School system did not have a high school for Black students. Johnson's mother valued learning and wanted better educational opportunities for her son, so she decided to move North to Chicago after a close friend shared with her that "armies of blacks were flocking to Chicago and that education, good jobs, and freedom was ours for the asking."[11] During the Great Migration, millions of Black people moved to northern cities like Harlem, New York; Detroit, Michigan; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Gary, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for better educational and professional opportunities.[12] The socioeconomic conditions for African Americans in the South were less than advantageous due to strict Jim Crow Laws and other legal policies that were in place from 1876-1965.[13] African Americans had little to no protection, nor did they have equal rights and rarely received justice.[14]

Historian Charles A. Simmons provides a glimpse at what life was like for many African Americans who lived under these conditions:

> Negroes also still could not vote and were denied work in many areas. Those Negroes who could find work could expect low wages. Lynching remained a traumatic ordeal for the entire Negro community. . .Lynching and frequent face-

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 47-51.
[12] Ibid, 57.
[13] Christian, *Empire: The House That John H. Johnson Built,* 42.
[14] Charles A. Simmons. *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage During National Crises, with Special Reference to Four Black Newspapers, 1827-1965*. (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, 1998), 32.

> to-face confrontations with hostile white mobs was another reason some Negroes moved. Many of those who migrated were farmers living in the rural South, where lynching was most common. Being innocent of a wrongdoing or just being a bystander was no guarantee of safety. In many instances the innocent were swept away when hostile mobs went on a rampage to "keep the Negro in his place." Hearing about such killings was fearful enough but not nearly as devastating as seeing them. . . Much of the time they were brushed-off as though they were children. They were required, however, to treat a white person with absolute respect, regardless of the person's standing in the community. That became a significant issue because the term of address Negroes were required to use was "mister," "madam," "sir," or "miss," yet when Southern whites addressed a Negro doctor or preacher or school teacher, they were not expected to use these terms nor did they do so.[15]

There were insufficient work opportunities, especially for those who did farm work, due to an economic depression but natural causes such as drought, heavy rain, and boll weevil infestation devastated crops across the South. Abbott, who often reported on these topics in the *Chicago Defender*, targeted Southern African American audiences and encouraged them to move North by sharing news of job opportunities and higher pay rates. Targeting Southern readership proved to be a successful strategy for the *Defender* which saw some of its highest sales figures in this region. However, this strategy also put a target on the backs of the newspaper's readers and distributors. Two people who distributed the newspaper were murdered, the Ku Klux Klan threatened those who were caught reading the newspaper, and some local White business owners, who had advertising placements in the newspaper, began to sever ties with the publication. Some towns in the South even banned the distribution and sale of the *Chicago Defender* altogether.[16]

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[15] Ibid, 29-31.
[16] Ibid, 29-36.

Many migrated in hopes of gaining access to the social, political and economic rights that they had been denied throughout American history. As capitalistic values grew within America, they also grew amongst the African American communities, who believed economic progress would allow them to become integrated into mainstream American society.[17] It was here where Johnson would finally see the possibilities available for Black people to achieve success, and it was in Chicago that he would eventually plant roots which enabled him to build a publishing empire with a rich legacy.

In 1933, when Johnson was fifteen, his family finally relocated to Chicago. As a student at Wendell Phillips High School, Johnson took journalism courses, became editor of his school newspaper, the *Phillipsite*, and served as business manager of his school yearbook, titled *the Red and Black.* After Wendell Phillips burned down, the students were transferred to Du Sable High School to complete their education.[18] Johnson continued to serve as editor of the *Phillipsite*, and was elected junior class president, senior class president and participated in the student council, the student forum and French Club.[19] After graduation in 1936, Johnson took an entry-level, part-time job with the Supreme Life Insurance Company, which marketed insurance to the African American consumer, while attending the University of Chicago as a part-time student.[20] At Supreme Life, Johnson received a crash course in business and entrepreneurship, and he eventually made the decision to quit school to take a full-time position with Supreme

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[17] Noliwe M. Rooks, *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture that Made Them.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 122.
[18] Simmons, *The African American Press*, 62-64.
[19] Ibid, 69.
[20] Ibid, 82-83.

Life, where he served as the personal assistant for Harry Pace, the company's CEO and president.[21]

Johnson researched and gathered information on current events in the Black community for the company's newsletter and was promoted to editor in 1939.[22] The extensive research Johnson was required to do made him very knowledgeable of current events, within both Black and White communities, and when Johnson would share this information with friends they always wanted to know "where can I find that article?" Johnson recognized the need for a publication that gave a "digest of Negro news," and he started what would become a media empire: Johnson Publishing Company.[23] He wanted to create a successful publication that would bring attention to the ignored aspects of African American life. He wrote in his 1989 autobiography titled *Succeeding Against the Odds*:

> There was no consistent coverage of the human dimensions of Black Americans in northern newspapers and magazines. It's hard to make people realize this, but Blacks didn't get married on the society pages of major American dailies until the late sixties.[24]

Johnson recognized the need for a publication like the *Negro Digest* and pursued his career aspirations in journalism while filling a void in Black magazine publication. His mother agreed to allow him to use her new furniture as collateral to take out a $500 loan, and his boss granted him access to Supreme Life Insurance's mailing list. With this

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[21] Ibid, 87-89.
[22] Derek T. Dingle, *Black Enterprise Titans of the B.E. 100s: Black CEOs Who Redefined and Conquered American Business. (*New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1999), 2.
[23] Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 114.
[24] Ibid.

help Johnson financed the first issue of the *Negro Digest* in 1942.[25] The publication was modeled after the successful *Reader's Digest*, a monthly periodical founded in 1922, which consisted of a collection of condensed news articles written on various subjects of interest to the general public.[26] *Negro Digest* published general interest news stories about African Americans aggregated from multiple sources, including both Black and White publications.[27] The magazines were similar but also had differences. *Negro Digest* did not print many digests – in spite of its name – and included full-length articles and content from academic publications.[28] The *Digest* also published original articles on topics such as business, education, daily life, politics, society and sports.[29]

In the opening editorial of *Negro Digest*, published on November 1, 1942, Johnson wrote about his goals and hopes for the publication:

> *Negro Digest* is published in response to a demand for a magazine to summarize and condense the leading articles and comment on the Negro now current in the press of the nation in ever increasing volume. The impact of the war and attendant discussion of what we are fighting for has focused new attention on the status of the Negro in America. There is wide spread interest in what the Negro thinks of the war, democracy and the South. In a single, easy-to-read issue, *Negro Digest* gives you a complete survey of current Negro life and thought. The editors read hundreds of magazines, newspapers, periodicals, books and reports in order to bring you a choice selection of articles and features each month. *Negro Digest* is dedicated to the development of interracial understanding and the promotion of national unity. It stands unqualifiedly for the winning of the war and the integration of all citizens into the democratic process.[30]

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[25] Ibid, 115-117.
[26] "RDA Timeline" Reader's Digest Association. *Reader's Digest*. http://www.rda.com/rda-timeline
[27] Burns, *Nitty Gritty,* 27-28.
[28] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 123.
[29] "John H. Johnson," Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed April 1, 2015.
[30] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 122.

The *Negro Digest* was the first of many successful publications that would come from JPC. In 1952, the two most widely circulated Black magazines, which will be the subject of this research, were both products of JPC. *Ebony* magazine, founded 1945, had a circulation of 379,000 and *Tan Confessions* magazine, founded in 1950, had a circulation of 200,000 in 1952.[31] Although these magazines had multiple similarities, and were marketed as a pair in some instances, the sister publications were recognized individually for their unique content.

Chapter 2 of this thesis will provide a literature review outlining the following subjects: social comparison theory, American magazine history, letters to the editor, confession magazines, the history of the Black press, *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Tan Confessions* and *TAN* magazines. Chapter 3, the methodology will provide a look into the researcher's processes for collecting, organizing and categorizing the data used in this study. Chapter 4 will relay the results/findings of the researcher's study: the demographics for each publication, audience reactions from the letters to the editor, which are measured by the researcher's five-point scale, including values that range from Very Negative to Very Positive; the most common themes found in the letters to the editor and a categorization of the types of content published in *Ebony*, *Tan Confessions,* and *TAN*. Chapter 5, the Discussion, will provide an in-depth analysis of the findings and an assessment of the letters to the editor through the lens of social comparison theory. Finally, Chapter 6, the Conclusion will summarize the research and provide final thoughts on why *Tan Confessions* may have been rebranded into *TAN* magazine.

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[31] Guzman, Jones and Hall. *1952 Negro Year Book: A Review of Events Affecting Negro Life,* 35.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review will outline social comparison theory, letters to the editor, the history of American magazines, including an in-depth look at the first confessions magazine, *True Story*, which paved the way for *Tan Confessions*, as well as *Life* magazine, which inspired *Ebony*. It will then provide an overview of the history of the African American press including Black newspapers, Black magazines, *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Tan Confessions* and *TAN*.

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory posits that, from the audience perspective, people seek self-evaluations about themselves and their "social worlds" by comparing themselves to others.[32] Social comparison theory is an extension of previous research concerning how opinions can influence the various processes within a social group.[33] Festinger hypothesized in 1954 that there is a drive within humans to evaluate one's own opinions and abilities against those of others. Although the opinions and abilities of humans vary from person to person, the evaluation of one such becomes important in part because these things can influence an individual's behavior. An individual's opinions and abilities are not something that can be measured physically, however these things can be compared socially. When individuals compare their opinions and abilities to others, they tend to compare themselves with people who they view as being similar to themselves. For the person comparing themselves, they can accurately assess the correctness of their

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[32] David Dunning, "Social Judgement as Implicit Social Comparison," Handbook of Social Comparison, (The Springer Series in Social Clinical Psychology, 2000), p. 353-378.

[33] Leon Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations* (1954) 7: 117. Retrieved from http://kslab.kaist.ac.kr/kse612/festinger1954.pdf

abilities and opinions.[34] On the topic of making self-comparisons to assess one's abilities, Festinger wrote:

> We may then conclude that there is selectivity in comparison on abilities and opinions and that one major factor governing the selectivity is simply the discrepancy between the person's own opinion of ability and that of another person. Phenomenologically, the appearance of this process is different for opinions and for abilities but conceptually it is exactly the same process. In dealing with opinions one feels that those with whom one does not compare oneself are different kinds of people or members of different groups or people with different backgrounds. Frequently this allegation of difference, to support the non-comparability, is made together with some derogation. In the case of abilities, the phenomenal process is that of designation of status inferior or superior to those persons who are [sic] noncomparable [sic] to oneself..." [35]

The more an individual identifies with the individual he or she is comparing themselves to, the more important it becomes to find similarities between abilities and opinions. This is related to an individual's desire to relate to others and belong to a group. If an individual discovers, through a comparison with others, that their abilities and opinions are valid, then they are more likely to relate to the group with similar opinions or abilities.[36]

Social comparison theory explains that an individual compares oneself and their attributes with others to "judge the consequences of his behavior when physical evidence is unavailable."[37] An individual's evaluation of their own behavior can be influenced by a "reference," which is another individual or group with whom the individual has similar

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[34] Ibid, 118-120.
[35] Ibid, 121-122.
[36] Ibid, 131-136.
[37] George P. Mochis. "Social Comparison and Informal Group Influence," *Journal of Marketing Research* (1976) 13: 237.

attributes.[38] Darley and Aronson's research (1966) supported Festinger's findings, which indicate that individuals are more likely to compare themselves with other individuals who they consider similar, especially under circumstances that induce anxiety.[39] Jones and Gerard (1967) found that a person is most likely to compare themselves to a person or group of people who they perceive to be on the same level, meaning they share characteristics. A person would not compare themselves to one who is perceived to be greater or less than the individual. An individual will make a social comparison between themselves and another individual or group with whom they believe have a similar outlook and morals.[40] Therefore, the individual or group is used as a reference point for assessing the actions and thoughts of the person who is making the comparison. Social comparison has two methods of assessment and an individual uses these methods to learn more about their own thoughts, capabilities and feelings. The two methods for social comparison are reflected appraisal and comparative appraisal.[41]

Jones and Gerard define reflected appraisal as "any evaluation of the self that is inferred from the behavior of other persons during interaction with them."[42] This means that an individual does not directly ask another individual about their morals but they are able to pick up on the individual's values through in person interactions and this helps the individual to define their own stance. Comparative appraisal means to form an

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[38] Ibid, 237-238.
[39] John M. Darley and Elliott Aronson, "Self-Evaluation vs. Direct Anxiety Reduction as Determinants of the Fear Affiliation Relationship," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology Supplement* (1966) 1:75.
[40] Edward E. Jones and Harold B. Gerard, *Social Psychology*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1967.
[41] Mochis, "Social Comparison and Informal Group Influence," 237-238.
[42] Jones and Gerard, *Social Psychology*.

"evaluation of one's own relative standing with respect to an attitude, belief, ability, emotion by observing the behavior of appropriate reference persons."[43] This method requires no face-to-face interaction and is picked up on by observing from a distance. The methods are similar because in both scenarios an individual depends on information from peer individual or group.[44] Jones and Gerard clearly explain the difference between the two methods in the following ways:

> In reflected appraisal the evaluation is mediated by the behavior of the other toward the person himself, whereas in comparative appraisal the person evaluates an aspect of himself by determining his relative standing without any reference to the other's behavior toward him" [17, p. 324]. That is, in comparative appraisal the other person need not be aware that he is being used as a reference person because his observable behavior can act as a point of reference for someone else [17, p. 324], whereas in reflected appraisal some direct form of interaction between the evaluation seeker and the evaluator is required.[45]

Another difference is that reflected appraisal necessitates that the individual making the comparison has similar qualities, circumstances that would allow for face to face interactions and conditions that would cause the individual to make a social comparison. Comparative appraisal face to face interactions don't take place because conclusions about the compared individual or group's attitudes, beliefs, abilities and emotions can be observed from a distance and then used to evaluate oneself.[46] In connection to reflected appraisal, Mochis found that "consumers are more likely to seek

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[43] Mochis, "Social Comparison and Informal Group Influence," 238.
[44] Mochis, "Social Comparison and Informal Group Influence," 238.
[45] Jones and Gerard, *Social Psychology*.
[46] Mochis, "Social Comparison and Informal Group Influence," 238.

information from friends to whom they are similar on various attributes than from those whom they have little in common."[47]

Goethals (1986) explored social comparison from the perspective of an individual comparing oneself to someone who demonstrated attributes that may not be similar to those of the individual making the comparison. Goethals said: "It can be hard to hear an extremely intelligent person on the radio, or see an extremely handsome one in the grocery store, or participate on a panel with an expert without engaging in social comparison no matter how much we would like not to."[48] Some individuals make a "forced" comparison to those they believe are greater than themselves. For example, an individual may initiate a forced comparison when they see someone in a television commercial who appears to be attractive, happy and rich and this forced comparison can have a positive or negative impact on the way the individual views themselves. Festinger identified that comparison with an individual or group perceived to be greater could result in the individual feeling inadequate and disappointed.[49] According to the self-evaluation maintenance model, individuals are driven to uphold and increase positive evaluations of themselves.[50] Festinger's research primarily related to how individuals sought to find similarities between themselves and comparative individuals or groups and how this impacted the ways in which they evaluated their abilities and opinions.

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[47] Ibid, 240.
[48] George R. Goethals, "Social Comparison Theory: Psychology from the Lost and Found," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 12, (September 1986): 261-278.
[49] Marsha L. Richins, "Social Comparison and the Idealized Images of Advertising," *Journal of Consumer Research* 18, no. 1 (1991): 72
[50] Jennifer J. Argo, Katherine White and Darren W. Dahl, "Social Comparison Theory and Deception in the Interpersonal Exchange of Consumption Information," *Journal of Consumer Research* 33, no. 1 (2006): 100.

However, later research conducted by Merton (1957) found that people compare themselves to people within and outside of their own social groups, and to people with the same social status who they share no social interaction with. Wood also found that individuals compare their personal situations, qualities and self-concepts.[51]

Counter Arguments Against Social Comparison Theory

Leon Festinger's research on social comparison theory considers that individuals look to those who are similar to reinforce their beliefs, opinions and evaluation of themselves. Social comparison theory supports the idea that individuals purposely self-assess to validate their beliefs about themselves by making comparison to mostly those who they deem relatable. However, there are counterarguments and studies with criticisms to consider when it comes to social comparison theory. Festinger recognized in his original research that there are situations that would be considered exceptions. For example, "forced comparisons," which are not voluntary comparisons on behalf of the self-evaluating individual, can happen under two circumstances. The first being that the individual is attracted to the comparison group despite having differences and the second being that the individual is not attracted to the comparison group due to leaving the group either physically or psychologically.[52] Goethals (1986) provided an example of how a comparison may be forced or not sought by the individual: "It can be hard to hear an extremely intelligent person on the radio, or see an extremely handsome one in the

[51] Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure.* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1957).
[52] Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," 130.

grocery store, or participate on a panel with an expert without engaging in social comparison no matter how much we would like not to."[53]

Festinger also acknowledged another circumstance that could potentially counter some of the key points that define social comparison theory and the assertion that people make comparisons between themselves and those who are similar to themselves. It is important to consider the individuals who may be biased when making comparisons for self-evaluation:

> "While opinions and abilities may, at first glance, seems to be quite different things, there is a close functional tie between them. They act together in the manner in which they affect behavior. A person's cognition (his opinions and beliefs) about the situation In which he exists and his appraisals of what he is capable of doing (his evaluation of his abilities) will together have bearing on his behavior. The holding of incorrect opinions and/or inaccurate appraisals of one's abilities can be punishing or even fatal in many situations."[54]

Goethals, Messick and Allision (1991) identified that when making a social comparison, some individuals may not have full social knowledge about those which they are making a comparison to and rely on "guess, conjecture, or rationalization."[55] Research that followed social comparison theory by Deutsch and Krauss (1965) found that people purposely look to those who are not similar to themselves for comparison because it helps an individual to learn about themselves.[56] Wheeler et al. (1969) concluded that individuals were more likely to make a comparison to a non-similar

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[53] Goethals, "Social Comparison Theory: Psychology from the Lost and Found," 272.
[54] Ibid, 117.
[55] George R. Goethals, David M. Messick, and Scott T. Allison, "The uniqueness bias: Studies of constructive social comparison." In J. Suls and T. A. Wills (Eds.), *Social comparison: Contemporary theory and research.* (Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum, 1991): 154.
[56] Morton Deutsch and Robert M. Krauss, *Theories in Social Psychology*. (New York: Basic Books, 1965).

individual or group first, when making a comparison to measure one's own abilities, especially if the individual or group was the highest achiever.[57] The findings of Goethals and Nelson (1973) reinforced that individuals who held a particular belief and were influenced by non-similar individuals falsely shared that they were influenced by those who were similar to themselves. When making a comparison between two potential comparison subjects, an individual's confidence can be more influenced by those who are not similar.[58] In some situations, an individual who is not similar can provide more "social support" than an individual who is similar to the comparer.[59]

It is also important to consider an individual's goals when they are making a comparison through social comparison theory because it may be for reasons other than self-comparing to confirm one's opinions, abilities, values and attributes. A person's objectives when making the comparison between themselves and others can have a noticeable effect on the process of comparison. For example, a person can be making a comparison with the intention of self-improvement or self-enhancement.[60] Wheeler (1966) found that those who make what are called "upward comparisons" or comparisons made for the sake of self-improvement, are more likely to compare themselves to someone who they don't view as equal to themselves. Upward comparison has a positive

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[57] Ladd Wheeler, et al., "Factors determining choice of a comparison other," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 5, (1969): 219-232.
[58] George R. Goethals and Eric R. Nelson, "Similarity in the Influence Process: The Belief-Value Distinction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 25, no. 1 (1973):121.
[59] Ibid, 122.
[60] Joanne. V. Wood, "Theory and Research Concerning Social Comparisons of Personal Attributes." *Psychological Bulletin* 106, no. 2 (1989): 233.

relation to striving for achievement or success.[61] In this situation, the individual compares themselves to someone who they consider greater than themselves or in a more ideal situation than themselves.[62] A comparison made for self-improvement is made to compare an individual's standing against those in the comparison group.[63] An example of this could include the audience of Johnson's publications *Ebony* and *Jet*, which were primarily dedicated to only publishing exemplary achievements of African Americans from various walks of life from business to entertainment, science, sports and politics. These high achieving African Americans published in the magazines could serve as a reference for upward comparison and self-improvement because they represented success and aspirational figures for comparison.

Wills (1981) found that an individual can also make what's considered a "downward comparison" by comparing themselves to one who they consider at lower level or less than ideal position than themselves when the goal for comparison is self-enhancement. A comparison for self-enhancement is related to making a social comparison to boost one's own self against the compared group.[64] An example of this could include some of the readers of *Tan Confessions*, who read the magazine for entertainment purposes. It would also include the readers who felt that the content represented a negative image of African Americans and included stories filled with

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[61] Ladd Wheeler, "Motivation as a determinant of upward comparison." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 1, no. 1 (1966): 30.
[62] Ibid, 27.
[63] Thomas Ashby Wills, "Downward Comparison Principles in Social Psychology." *Psychological Bulletin* 90, no. 2 (1981): 249.
[64] Ibid, 245-249.

people with low morals, who participated in unsavory actions and trashy behavior. It is also worth considering that for some of these individuals who read the confessions in the magazine as a cautionary tale, they felt that the stories not only served as a lesson but also an example that their own lives could have been as bad as some of the confession writers. It can be assumed that these individuals would use the lessons in the confessions to improve themselves.

Letters to the Editor

For centuries, readers of newspapers and magazines have taken an active role in voicing their opinions publicly—whether it was projected to a crowd by a town crier or written in pamphlets. As early as the 17th century, newsbooks, which are also known as "corantos," were known for sharing content from its readers—early letters to the editor. Newsbooks and the newspapers that followed were made up of a substantial number of letters submitted by readers and one newsbook, printed in the 1640s, was even titled *Packet of Letters*.[65] Not all of the letters printed in early newsbooks consisted of reader feedback as the submissions included "official proclamations signed by government officials or military officers that announced new laws, charges of misconduct, or victory in battle…"[66] Newsbooks described all incoming submissions as letters however, not all of the material can be categorized under our modern definition of a letter to the editor. Reader described the attributes that defined what became known as a letter to the editor, which are descriptors that we still reference today:

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[65] Reader, Bill, *Audience Feedback in the News Media*. (New York: Routledge of Taylor & Francis Group, 2015): 28-29.
[66] Ibid, 30

> It begins with a salutation to the editor, a practice that continues to this day in many publications, including some that add the salutation "To the Editor" whether the original writer included it or not. The above example also includes a request for publication, signifying that the writer did not presume that his submission would be published—that is, an acknowledgement of the editor's gatekeeping role. The writer makes reference to an earlier news item that inspired the response, thus maintaining the structure of dialectic and also evoking the classical concepts of both the Socratic method and of "audi alteram partem"—the right to reply. The essay also makes reference to the "Reader," signifying the letter was not intended only for the editor's eyes, but rather was submitted for the newsbook's audience. Finally, the letter was "signed," simply with the initials "M.D.H.," thus maintaining the convention of closing such letters with some sort of signature to indicate "authorship" by someone other than the editor.[67]

Overtime, newsbooks began to distinguish "audience feedback" or letters from other submitted material and articles.[68] The invention of the printing press, development of freedom of press laws and societal changes would all further impact and evolve these writings that we know of today as the letter to the editor. By the 20th century, it was incredibly common for newspaper and magazine readers to submit feedback, and many publications shared this feedback with the rest of their audience by publishing letter to the editor sections.[69] In newspapers, the "letters to the editor" section has traditionally served as an outlet for readers to openly express their opinions and vocalize their thoughts in a public media space.[70] Landert and Jucker (2011) described how this space merges public and private: "They may be public in the sense that they are within the public space and can be read by a large and anonymous audience, while at the same time discussing topics which we think of as 'private' and using language which is associated with informal and

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[67] Ibid, 37.
[68] Ibid, 36-37.
[69] Ibid, 62.
[70] Daniela Landert and Andrea H. Jucker, "Private and public in mass media communication: From letters to the editor to online commentaries." *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, (2011): 1423.

private conversations." In the letters to the editor that are selected for publication, not all of them directly address the publication's articles, format or layout, but some comment on current events or other topics.[71] (Note: This is something that I also found in my analysis of *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* as a portion of the letters were rated 'Neutral' if they did not directly relate to an article or magazine content). Confession magazines and publication's like Johnson's *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* would be considered special interest magazines as they are published with the African American audience in mind. Special interest magazines, which are typically geared toward niche audiences, create a relatable community amongst its readers. According to Abrahamson, these niche publications serve "a special role in their readers' lives, constructing a community or affinity group in which the readers feel they are members. . ."[72]

The establishment of a community, such as the one created between a publication and its readers can only be maintained through active participation.[73] An example of such participation, includes the action on behalf of both the publication, which puts out content, and of a reader who consumes the content and even contributes in the form of actions such as writing letters to the editor. Niche magazines can also play a role in how their readers identify, express and formulate ideas about what their values are as a community. The letters to the editor written by readers, or community members, allow them to express and define themselves as individuals because in these writings they are

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[71] Landert and Jucker, "Private and public in mass media communication," 1429.
[72] Bill Reader and Kevin Moist, "Letters As Indicators of Community Values: Two Case Studies of Alternative Magazines." *J & MC Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2008): 824.
[73] Ibid, 825.

free to vocalize how they want to be viewed. The letters published characterize the publication and is a physical representation of a reader being actively involved in the community.[74]

There has been considerable research on the letter writers who contribute to publications. William D. Tarrant, a University of Oregon graduate student, conducted a study via questionnaire amongst letter writers who had their correspondence published in *Register Guard* in 1956.[75] He found that letter writers were "better educated, less mobile, more religious…more mature, more self-expressive, better read, more individualistic and much older than the average citizen."[76] Gary Vacin, a Kansas State University graduate student, found that readers who had their letters published in the *Topeka Daily Capital* and the *Witchita Eagle* were usually older than age 55, male, educated, lived in their neighborhoods for approximately 20 years and held white-collar jobs.[77] A national survey conducted in 2003 found similar results, which were that published letter writers were older, well-educated and well-to-do.[78]

There has also been significant research on how publication editors viewed the letters to the editor section. One study found that more than 60 percent of editors believed the section was an accurate representation of public opinion. However, subsequent research found that the opposite was correct—the letters published did not

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[74] Ibid, 834.
[75] Reader, *Audience Feedback in the News Media*, 73.
[76] William D. Tarrant, "Who Writes Letters to the Editor?" *Journalism Quarterly* 34, 4 (1957), 501–2.
[77] Gary L. Vacin, "A Study of Letter-Writers," *Journalism Quarterly* 42, 3 (1965), 464–65.
[78] Bill Reader, Guido H. Stempel III and Douglass K. Daniel. "Age, Wealth, Education Predict Letters to Editor." *Newspaper Research Journal* 25, 4 (2004), 55-65.

represent public opinion.[79] In the 1970s, David Grey and Trevor Brown concluded that letters to the editor sections were more representative of the views of publication editors: "Editors . . . seem to be asking 'What do we want to hear?' and not so much 'What do the writers want to say?' By implication, those with minority or less popular viewpoints tend to be kept out of the mainstream of discussion."[80] In addition, they discussed in depth how the selection process for published letters required further research before a full assessment could be made:

> "More letters are apparently being written to newspapers, but are they published? And is the demographic profi le of the typical letter-writer changing? Since most of the 30 years of research on letters-to-the-editor has been based on only those published, if may be that the profile which has emerged reflects less the writers themselves than the selection of editors. A broader but largely invisible cross-section of Americans may have been writing for some time; theirs may be the inarticulate, sometimes abusive letters screened from print. Until more systematic knowledge of editorial selection decisions is available, we may be losing valuable indicators of political attitudes, frustrations and change."[81]

Although the letter to the editor may not serve as an accurate representation of public opinion, Reader (2015) explained how a letter to the editor can be insightful in various ways: "An LTE can reveal a lot about the writer and about the culture of that time and place, and it also can reveal a lot about the author-editor who allowed it to be published."[82]

Reader (2005) reinforced the identity of letters to the editor sections as spaces for public discussion "in the democratic traditions." These spaces were described as "a place

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[79] Ibid.
[80] James Lawrence, "Fake Letters are Published Lies," *Democrat and Chronicle,* Rochester, N.Y., August 25, 2004, A12.
[81] Sue O'Brien, "Mowing Down the Astroturf," *The Denver Post*, July 16, 2002, E6.
[82] Reader, *Audience Feedback in the News Media*, 15.

to share ideas," "a place to debate issues," "to allow people to participate in public dialogue," and "hopefully, they serve the role of the old-fashioned New England Town meeting."[83] Reader and Moist (2008) described how editors view these letters as sources "for unfettered public discourse" and described the many ways they may be of use to publication editors: "For example, editors may use LTEs to discern what issues matter to their readers, may consider LTEs when making content decisions, and may publish letters simply to appeal to readers. There is a pride component as well—a robust LTE section can suggest that a publication is valued by its community."[84] The increase in letter submissions in the 20th century resulted in increased restrictions from publication editors, who practiced a form a gatekeeping when deciding what letters would be published. According to Reader: "Through the gatekeeping process, feedback features became more reflective of editors' ideals about public discourse than broader society."[85]

For publication editors, there is a method behind editing, selecting, and publishing letters to the editor in their newspapers and magazines, as they do not publish every letter that they receive. Kapoor (1995) found in a survey that 23 percent of the participating newspapers shared that they published less than 50 percent of the letters received and 77 percent of the newspapers published more than 50 percent of the letters received. Sixty newspapers reported that they printed 90% of the letters received.[86] Reader and Moist

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[83] Bill Reader, "An Ethical 'Blind Spot': Problems of Anonymous Letters to the Editor*." Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 20, no. 1 (2005):68.
[84] Reader and Moist, "Letters As Indicators of Community Values," 826.
[85] Reader, *Audience Feedback in the News Media*, 62.
[86] Kapoor, "Most papers receive more letters," 18-21.

(2008) describe the letters to the editor selection process as a form of "editorial gatekeeping:"

> Most editors apply certain guidelines when selecting letters for publication: many prefer letters that are succinct and well-written, that refer to timely and "important" issues, and are signed by the writers. Not all LTES make it into print, regardless of the number received. Some argue that published LTES are perhaps more representative of editors' professional values than of the values of LTE writers. That gate-keeping along with the fact that the educated middleclass produces more LTE writers, make newspaper LTEs poor indicators of broad public opinion.[87]

By the 20th century, it was very common to see letters published in groups under titles that often described the content of the letter, which served as a way to organize the reader feedback according to how the editor defined it. For example, "Our Complaint Book," was used by the *Galveston Daily News* and "Voice of the People" was used by *The Chicago Tribune* .[88] This practice is one that was also utilized by Johnson Publishing Company in printing the letters to the editor sections for *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*. In this research it was very common to see letter groupings such as "High School Reader," "GI Stories," "Overseas Mail" and "Critical Letters."

Other publishing guidelines can include rules regarding anonymity and whether the letter writer identifies themselves. Most newspapers would not publish anonymous letters and 85% of newspapers required the letter writer's name to be published.[89] Regarding the publishing of anonymous letters to the editor, one editor said: "The benefit is to allow more of the people who would feel otherwise restricted, because of job

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[87] Reader and Moist, "Letters As Indicators of Community Values,", 826-827.
[88] Reader, *Audience Feedback in the News Media*, 66.
[89] Suraj Kapoor,"Most papers receive more letters." *The Masthead* 47, no. 2 (1995): 18-21.

security, fear of getting beaten up, fear of having graffiti sprayed on their houses, to speak up."[90] Many of the editors interviewed in Reader's study expressed negative views regarding anonymous letters to the editor and described them with terminology such as "cheap shots" and "mean-spirited." Another editor said: "There's a difference between somebody who's writing a letter saying 'Don't use my name' and an anonymous letter. In the first example, the person might be afraid he'll lose his job. In the second example, it's just garbage."[91] Kapoor (1995) found that 84.4 percent of newspapers had a requirement for publishing the letter writers name, while 10.8 percent were willing to print the letter without the name if it was for "good cause," and 3.4 percent were willing to print the letter anonymously if the letter writer requested it.[92]

In the same study, 96.3 percent of the newspapers said they edited the letters to the editor prior to publishing and 34.4 percent returned the letter to the reader so that they could make the changes. The most common reason for edits included the following: shortening the letter, editing for grammar, libel reasons or taste. Twenty-five percent of the papers informed the letter writers that the letter would be edited in advance of publishing the content. Large newspapers were most likely to shorten letters, while small newspapers were only 50 percent likely to shorten the letter before publishing.[93]

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[90] Reader, "An Ethical 'Blind Spot'," 68.
[91] Ibid, 69.
[92] Kapoor, "Most papers receive more letters," 18-21.
[93] Ibid.

Kapoor (1995) found that overtime the submission of letters to the editor has steadily increased annually, as *The New York Times* reported receiving 30,629 letters in 1967 and 58,524 letters in 1973.[94]

American Magazine History

The first American magazines, *The General Magazine* and *American Magazine*, were published only three days a part in 1741. Andrew Bradford published *American Magazine, or a Monthly View of the Political State of the British Colonies* on February 13, 1741, and Benjamin Franklin's publication, *General Magazine, and Historical Chronicle, For all the British Plantations in America* came afterward, although it was planned first.[95] Early American publishers and editors were generally prominent men who saw magazines as a potentially lucrative business venture.[96] They looked to British publications like the *Gentlemen's* and *London Magazine* as inspirations and hoped to replicate their success. Before the Revolutionary War, British magazines were published in the colonies but the American magazines that came after the war were very similar in content, format, and principle. The first American magazine publishers were vocal about how British magazines influenced them and they hoped that American magazines would impress those in other countries, particularly England. Early publications were short lived, with Bradford's magazine lasting for three months with Franklin's outlasting it by a total of six months. Both magazines set an important precedent in American publishing.

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[94] Ibid.
[95] Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume 1: 1741-1850.* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957), 24.
[96] Penelope L. Bullock, *The Afro-American Periodical Press, 1838-1909* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 205.

Many followed shortly thereafter including *Boston Weekly Magazine* (1743), *Christian History* (1743), *Royal American Magazine* (1774) and *Pennsylvania Magazine* (1775). It wouldn't be until after the Revolutionary War that American magazine publishing would prosper and cities like Boston, Massachusetts and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania would become publishing epicenters.[97]

In the eighteenth century, there were four greatly influential magazines that outlasted their contemporaries: the *Columbian Magazine* (1786), the *American Museum* (1787), the *Massachusetts Magazine* (1789) and the *New York Magazine* (1790). The *Museum* is classified as one of the most significant magazines of the day because it provided a rare glimpse at America's unique culture, economics and politics between the years of 1787-1792, and was considered more "American" due to having less of a British influence.[98] In this thesis' research, a comparison can be made between early American publications being inspired by British publications before developing their own unique flair, which is similar to how JPC's publications were directly inspired by mainstream publications but developed their own identifies as magazines for an African American audience.

In the late 1700s, niche publications developed for readers with special interests. An example is *Gentlemen and Lady's Town and Country Magazine*, a Boston-based women's magazine published in 1784, that offered fiction, advice for women, and discussions on marriage and appropriate behavior for women.[99] Subscriptions were the

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[97] Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume 1,* 21-31.
[98] Ibid, 30.
[99] Ibid, 29.

primary revenue for magazines because not many printed advertisements. Some publications featured small advertisements on their covers, inside the magazine or the inserted as a separate leaflet on the inside. There was some variation when it came to magazine formats however, most publications followed the style of British magazines. Magazine length also varied. For example, *American Magazine*, the first magazine printed, was thirty-four pages and the *American Museum* was one-hundred pages.[100]

Between 1741 and 1794, magazine content was mostly reprinted pieces from American and British books, newspapers and pamphlets. Most content originated from British books on biographies, the sciences, and travel. Some magazines reprinted articles from other magazines, including popular British publications like *Gentleman's*, *London Magazine*, the *Westminster* and the *European*. The first issue of the *American Museum* printed seven full pamphlets. It was not commonplace for magazine editors to credit their sources but many did. After the Revolutionary War it became commonplace to properly credit original works and people complained if their writing was not properly credited. Illustrations often appeared on magazine covers or title pages and originated from woodcut printmaking, where images were carved into wood and printed onto paper, as was the standard style for England's publications. *The Royal American* was the first American magazine illustrated with copperplate engravings and two appeared in each issue.[101]

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[100] Ibid, 34-35.
[101] Ibid, 36-39.

Publishers gradually began to create original content and featured essays; fiction; ode, pastoral, elegy and satire poetry; political writing, religious writing and sermons, articles on the economy, education, womanhood and women's rights, and commentary on "social customs, manners, fashions, reforms, and such topics…"[102] Mott found that despite the unoriginal content, and although the writings were not excellent, magazines from the time period accurately reflected American life. He wrote:

> Thus the contents of American magazines, 1741-94, were varied in subject matter and form. They were largely borrowed, they were often ill written and oftener dull, and in the light of later years they were sometimes ridiculous; but they are invaluable as a mirror of the current ideas of writing and of literary taste, and as a picture of the social and political life of America during the years they cover.[103]

After the Postal Act of 1794, magazines could be mailed to individuals "when the mode of conveyance and the size of the mails will permit of it."[104] Weekly, monthly and quarterly magazines were printed with weeklies being the most successful. There was a rebirth of specialized periodicals like agricultural magazines, law magazines, comic periodicals, theatrical reviews, children's magazines, college magazines, biography and travel magazines, poetry magazines, and weekly women's periodicals. From 1794 through 1825, there was a great desire to establish a literary identity that was uniquely American. Mott expressed the important link between American literature and patriotism:

> The patriotic desire to achieve a national literature, to throw off the shackles of literary dependence as those of political subservience had been thrown off, is a paramount motive in much that was written for a hundred years after the close of the Revolution; and it is peculiarly noticeable in the magazines at the turn of the century and for the ensuing two decades.[105]

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[102] Ibid, 40-64.
[103] Ibid, 67.
[104] Ibid, 119.
[105] Ibid, 183.

During this time, which is referred to as the period of nationalism, various magazines were published. Mott provides a concise glimpse into the significance of nationalism within the context of America's magazine history:

> A summary of the period of nationalism in American magazine history must at least point out the facts that magazines of many kinds greatly increased in number, especially in the twenties; that there was a marked development of class periodicals, notably those devoted to religion; that politics occupied a large share of magazine energy to the detriment of belles-lettres; that weekly magazines of all kinds were prominent; that financial success was almost unknown to magazine publishers and editors; and that, in spite of large borrowings from English and other sources, there was a loud and insistent demand for a peculiarly American literate.[106]

After 1825, magazine production continued to expand especially weekly literary papers. The first women's magazine to last more than five years was the *Ladies' Magazine*, which was founded in Boston by Mrs. Sara Josepha Hale in 1828. The magazine advocated for women's education and employment as teachers and at seminaries.[107] Just as women's rights was an important topic during that time so was abolition. African Americans were not prominently featured, nor did they have a hand in the editorial processes of most mainstream magazines. This would later lead to the establishment of the Black press, which aimed to give a voice to African Americans and the issues that affected their daily lives as will be discussed in detail later in the literature review. However, at this time periodicals on antislavery efforts and reform were published and hotly debated, and publications like the *Philanthropist* (1818), the *Manumission Intelligencer* (1819), the *Emancipator* (1820) and the *Genius of Universal*

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[106] Ibid, 210-211.
[107] Ibid, 340, 349.

Emancipation (1839) were devoted to discussing the topic.[108] Before 1830 there were more than 50 newspapers that printed columns with antislavery literature, including: The *African Repository* (1830), the *Liberator* (1831), the *Emancipator* (1833), the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1833), the *Anti-Slavery Record* (1835), the *Anti-Slavery Examiner* (1836), the *Philanthropist* (1836), the *Evangelist* (1837), the *Pennsylvania Freeman* (1838), and the *Massachusetts Abolitionist* (1839).[109]

These publications would all serve as a precursor to the African American newspapers and magazines that would be established in the future. From Abbott's *Chicago Defender* to Johnson's *Negro Digest*, the founding of antislavery periodicals was an essential stepping-stone to the protest spirit that many Black publications would embody as they championed Black life, causes and rights. The first Black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, protested slavery and combated negative stereotypes about African Americans. The newspaper was established in New York in 1827 and will be further discussed on the literature review section on the Black press.

As America experienced industrial and economic development in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the magazine industry experienced growth as well. Magazines were a popular and useful source for information. Prior to the late 1880s, magazines were niche publications that catered to specific fields, interests and subject matters. General magazines were intended for an educated audience with the financial means to purchase them. They were considered a leisurely item compared to newspapers. Newspapers

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[108] Ibid, 121-176.
[109] Ibid, 456-457.

presented timely news for a general audience whereas magazines catered to interests of the upper class. Magazines utilized literary writing elements and illustrations. When they were priced between ten to fifteen cents, they became competition for newspapers.[110]

In June 1893, Samuel S. McClure founded *McClure's Magazine,* a monthly characterized by numerous illustrations, well-written literary pieces, articles and fiction. The publication was unlike any other in that it was considered "timely, lively, and journalistic." The magazine sold for fifteen cents per copy or a dollar and a half for a yearly subscription and was very successful. [111] *McClure's* became known for muckraking during the Progressive Era, exposing the true and often corrupt actions of companies, prominent individuals and society. *McClure's* was one of a few very popular magazines during this period that were known as ten-cent magazines. Mott describes what made ten-cent magazines so unique amongst their contemporaries:

> What did characterize them were copious and well-printed illustration, liveliness and freshness in presentation of nonfiction articles, variety in subject matter, a serious treatment of contemporary problems, a keen interest in new inventions and progress in general, and attention to major world events.[112]

Other ten-cent magazines, like *Argosy* (1882), the *Cosmopolitan* (1886) and *Munsey's* (1889) were considered revolutionary in magazine publishing because not only were they successful amongst consumers who subscribed, but they were filled with advertising. Traditional, long-established magazines were not receptive to ten-cent

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[110] Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume IV: 1885-1905*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957), 2.
[111] Ibid, 5.
[112] Ibid, 6.

magazines and questioned their success.[113] From 1885 through 1892, advertising and magazine circulation grew so much that it prompted many to invest in new publications. In the early 1890s, advertising revenue was very lucrative for magazines especially during the month of December when holiday advertisements drew in readers, and some publications charged $350 per page. The December 1891 issue of *Harper's Magazine* featured 177 pages of advertisements and *Century* magazine had 150 pages of ads with major companies hawking their wares, including the Eastman Kodak Company, Quaker Oats, H-O (Hornby Oats), Postum Cereal, Grape Nuts, The National Biscuit Company, H.J. Heinz Company, Van Camp's Boston Baked Pork and Beans, D.M. Ferry & Company, Vaughn's Seed Store, Columbia Graphophone, and Pears' Soap.[114]

There were journals and periodicals for nearly every special interest subject from arts to education to philosophy and the sciences and recreational activities. Various professional organizations, industries and professions also had their own publications. Mott examines how society fostered the growth of these varied periodicals:

> It was an era of multiplicity, if not of plenty. There were more money and leisure than ever before, and more slums in the cities and misery on the farms. There was more ambition, even among a traditionally ambitious people, than ever before, leading to its climax in a "success" cult at the end of the century. There were more sports, more popular songs, more humor than ever before. There was a deeper social consciousness and there was a greater enthusiasm for adult education than America had known before. In short, the nineties were an era of more of everything in America.[115]

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[113] Ibid,7.
[114] Ibid, 15-25.
[115] Ibid,10.

Although social consciousness was at the forefront of the minds of many Americans and there were efforts to improve women's rights, the rights of emancipated African Americans would continue to be a topic of uncertainty. Magazines on topics such as agriculture, airplanes, automobiles and carriages, banking and insurance, engineering, humor, medicine, music, railroads, recreation and sports, religion, theater and drama and women's education, fashion, family life, suffrage and societal rights were very common.[116] Despite there being a periodical for nearly every special interest, magazines published between 1885 to 1905 proved to be more than leisurely publications meant for art, hobbies, literature and travel. Magazines reported on the same economic, political and social topics that could be found in newspapers. Mott describes this as a "progressive narrowing of the gap between the magazine and the newspaper…"[117] Social issues and movements were commonly discussed as various magazines covered topics such as crime, education, inner-city problems, poverty, the labor movement, lynching and suffrage of African Americans, social work, political corruption within city, state and the federal government, racial issues and reforms.[118] As Black newspapers and magazines developed, these topics would also become commonly reported, especially when it came to improving economic, education, labor, and civil and social rights for African Americans.

As photography evolved, magazine layouts and photo displays also changed. Previously, magazines featured images that were engraved, drawn, painted or printed

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[116] Ibid, 250-383.
[117] Ibid, 155.
[118] Ibid, 190-215.

through woodcuts and other methods.[119] The way magazines used images, whether illustrations or photographs, in combination with news articles made them a unique medium that were "capable of reaching a national audience and using illustrations and then photographs in a large-scale and dramatic way."[120] Kitch shares how magazines reached audiences in a visual way that newspapers were not able to:

> The stories newsmagazines told, though, were based in fact, and their consistency over time—combined with their documentary nature—created and reinforced a particular view of the national character.[121]

By the end of the nineteenth century, mass production through advanced printing machines, photography and improved circulation figures helped magazine publishing develop into a lucrative business. Circulation figures reached the hundreds of thousands and instead of subscriptions, advertising became the primary source of revenue for magazines.[122]

Life Magazine

Life magazine was the main inspiration for Johnson's *Ebony* magazine, and its influence was noticeable from the content to the layout. Some of *Ebony's* readers even made comparisons between the two publications in the Letters to the Editor.

Life's publisher and illustrator John Ames Mitchell had $10,000 and an idea when he launched the publication in 1883.[123] The first issue was published on January 4, 1883, and the premise was simple: a weekly picture magazine featuring illustrations inspired by

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[119] Ibid, 153.
[120] Kitch, *Pages from the Past: History & Memory in American Magazines,*17.
[121] Ibid, 18.
[122] Bullock, *The Afro-American Periodical Press*, 205-207.
[123] Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume IV,* 556.

everyday life. After realizing that the best illustrators of the day worked for *Century, Harper's* and *Pluck and Judge*, Mitchell prepared to draw most of the images himself but after meeting artist F.G. Attwood, who was described as being "full of ideas and with a good sense of comedy," the magazine took off.[124] *Life* printed writings about the arts, current events, drama, literature and ethics.[125] A former editor of *Life* said that "one could, figuratively speaking, find himself or herself in the magazine's pages, or recognize one's hopes, or stoke one's indignation, or appease one's need for self-improvement or the need to identify with the great long line of humanity reaching back to the caves."[126] *Quarterly Illustrator*, one of *Life's* contemporaries, published in its June 1893 issue that "There is a charm about *Life*…an aroma all its own, a quality as distinct from any other publication as if it were alone among magazines."[127]

Life generated income from both high circulation and advertising revenue from corporations that ranged from alcohol to automobile industries. During the Panic of 1907, *Life* maintained high circulation of between sixty to seventy thousand copies sold. The picture magazine attained its highest level of success right before World War I in 1914, and by 1916, the circulation reached 150,000. Over the years, *Life* featured sketches and drawings from respected artists such as Louis Raemaekers, Gluyas Williams, Coles Phillips, Will James and C.H. Sykes and poems from writers like F.P. Adams, Corey Ford, Montague Glass, Rollin Kirby, Will Rogers and Dorothy Parker.[128] Kitch describes

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[124] Ibid, 559.
[125] Ibid, 561.
[126] Kitch, *Pages from the Past: History & Memory in American Magazines*, 18.
[127] Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume IV*, 561.
[128] Ibid, 565-566.

how the long-term success of *Life* led to it being considered one of the top magazines during this time:

> It had then completed two full decades of very general acceptance by the more discriminating classes of American readers. It had become one of the two or three greatest satirical weeklies ever published in this country. Its very name was a token of smartness and with without vulgarity.[129]

Confession Magazines

Confession stories are true-life, dramatic submissions penned by readers, from a first-person perspective and printed with professionally modeled photographs.[130] These stories, which often discuss love, heartbreak, romance, scandal, shame and regret, have captivated readers for decades. Featuring an anonymous character, who was often female, the author shared stories of finding themselves in a complicated situation that resulted in a lesson that did not always include a happy ending.[131] *True Story* was the first confessions magazine, founded by Bernarr Macfadden in May 1919, was extremely successful since its inception.[132] The cover of the first issue featured a full-color photograph of an attractive, young, fashionable couple and bold headlines, such as "truth is stranger than fiction" and below the photograph, the caption: "…their love turned to hatred." The cover encouraged readers to submit their own stories in exchange for a cash payment: "We offer $1000.00 for your Life Romance." Within the first year of publication, the magazine reached a readership of one million as members of the working

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[129] Ibid.
[130] David M. Earle and Georgia Clarkson Smith, "True Stories From Real Life: Hearst's Smart Set, Macfadden's Confessional Form, and Selective Reading," *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies 4*, no. 1 (2013): 31.
[131] Roseann M. Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires: Power and Please in *True Story* Magazine," *Critical Studies in Media Communication 18*, no. 2 (2001): 177.
[132] Michael H. Randall, "Confession magazines." *Serials Review* 7, no. 1 (1981): 45 and 47.

class in the Jazz Age read about partying – dancing and drinking, along with heavy petting. Some reports measure the circulation by the mid-1920s as somewhere between 850,000 and two million.[133]

Macfadden, who had an interest in bodybuilding and nutrition, was inspired to create a confessions magazine after he received hundreds of letters to the editor written to his first magazine, titled *Physical Culture*, asking for advice on intimacy, love, marriage and romance. In 1924, *True Story's* newsstand sales exceeded its subscription sales by 14 percent, illustrating its large urban readership.[134] Earle and Smith identify what made *True Story* garner such widespread appeal for its urban readers:

> *True Story* was a pioneer for tapping into this demographic by portraying the hardships of working-class life. The confessionals relied on a plot formula of sin—suffer—repent, in which the protagonists were invariably "victims" struggling in a web [of conflicting social pressures] they [could] not avoid, escape or really comprehend.[135]

By 1926*, True Story* was the third highest selling magazine in the country next to the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Ladies' Home Journal,* both very popular and groundbreaking magazines published by Cyrus H.K. Curtis. Out of the three*, True Story* had the highest newsstand sales figures.[136] *True Story* reportedly had a monthly circulation of 2,016,000 in the last six months of 1926.[137] The creation and success of *True Story* inspired the birth of other confessional magazines such as *I Confess* and *True Marriage Stories*. Macfadden even launched other confession magazines such as *Dream*

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[133] Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires," 174 and 178.
[134] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 35-36.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid, 36.
[137] Arthur McKeogh, "The Truth about the 'True' Story," *The English Journal* 16, no. 6 (1927): 413-414.

World, *True Detective, True Confessions* and *True Romances* to answer the demand and take on the growing competition.[138] By 1927, the number of confession magazines continued to soar as over a dozen of them appeared on newsstands. The combined circulation of the six most popular confession magazines at the time totaled 3.25 million per month and the annual sales figures were over 39 million.[139] The popularity of confession magazines inspired other types of magazines to print stories with a similar format. For example, film magazines *Photoplay* and *Screenland* printed first-person narratives of aspiring actors and movie stars. Magazines like the *Cosmopolitan*, the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Snappy Stories*, and fiction magazines like *Ainslee's* and *Smart Set* adopted a confessional format.[140] Although confession magazines had high circulation figures, they weren't the most successful when it came to attracting advertisers. George Gerbner found that around 1950 there were approximately forty confession magazines with a combined circulation of 16 million. Twelve women's magazines featured more advertising than the 16 top-selling confession magazines.[141]

The popularity of confession magazines inspired full-length, hardcover books featuring confessional stories. Macfadden printed a series of *True Story* inspired novels and Ray Long, a writer for *Cosmopolitan*, published a book called *As I Look at Life*, *Intimate Stories of Love, Marriage, Divorce, Fortune, Adventure, Health by Fourteen Famous Men and Women Who Have Lived and Felt the Strange Experiences They Tell.*[142]

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[138] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 36.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] George Gerbner, "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," *Social Problems 6*, no. 1 (1958): 29.
[142] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 36.

Mandziuk describes how the concept of confessions were not new, however, confession magazines were able to capitalize on sharing these stories in a way that was new:

> Confessional discourse itself certainly was nothing new by the early twentieth century (Foucault, 1980, pp 17-23), but the successful commodification of such first-person narratives, taken from "everyday life" situations, was an ingenious and powerful creation. True Story combined traumas with titillation while also trumpeting the wonders of the turn of the century age, thus providing a template for popular culture articulations of common experience still evident today in our sensationalized television talk shows and our appetites for "reality" television programs.[143]

Fulton Ourseler, a journalist who worked for Macfadden and penned his biography, described how the letters sharing confessions were comparable to public confessions:

> Most of them [the letters] had the conscious ring of the public confession, such as is heard in a Salvation Army gathering, or in an old-fashioned testimony meeting of Southern camp religionists. The folly of transgression, the terrible effects of ignorance, the girls who had not been warned by wise parents—a whole series of tragedies out the American soil were falling, day after day, on the desk of the editor. (pp. 213-214)[144]

As previously mentioned, confessional magazines were popular amongst a working-class audience. A 1930 report by the American Association of Advertising Agencies identified *True Story* as the most popular periodical for readers with incomes between $0-$999 and $1,000-$1,999.[145] Gerbner found that 64 percent of *True Confessions* readers were from working-class homes, 50 percent of them were housewives and 60 percent of them had an annual family income less than $4,000.[146]

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[143] Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires," 175.
[144] Ibid, 177.
[145] Ibid, 178.
[146] Gerbner, "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," 30.

(Note: According to an online inflation calculator $1,000 in 1930 is worth $15,663.59 today; $1,999 in 1930 is worth $31,311.52 today and $4,000 in 1930 is worth $62,654.37 today).

These magazines were generally detested by intellectuals who thought they were a creation of mass production that symbolized cultural decline.[147] However, confession magazines allowed their readers to identify themselves through a "deliberately induced sense of reality" which was designed to discuss the concerns and situations that they experienced.[148] Prior to the debut of *True Story* and other confession magazines, women's magazines catered to the refined woman and ideals about "manners, proper speech, and elegance" and working class women were an afterthought.[149] Earle and Smith, authors of "True Stories From Real Life: Hearst's Smart Set, Macfadden's Confessional Form, and Selective Reading," described how *True Story's* unique style of storytelling and appealing format led to success and support from its audience:

> This success relied on vernacular tone and a popular aesthetic of social realism that, while certainly sensationalized, appealed to a largely working-class audience. A 1929 study in the Journal of Educational Research maintains that the confessionals were the preferred reading for immigrants, young women, and the "socially maladjusted."[150]

Magazine historian Theodore Peterson described confession magazines as being published for a person of "low level of sophistication…who could read but who, for the time being at least, were not disposed to think."[151] Even the *Saturday Evening Post*

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[147] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 30-31.
[148] Ibid, 31.
[149] Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires," 174-175.
[150] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 35.
[151] Ibid, 31.

referred to *True Story's* readers as "Macfadden's anonymous amateur illiterates."[152] This was a common opinion on confession magazines because the dramatic style of confessions gave them a reputation of being similar to tabloids.[153] An article titled *"The New Confessional,"* by Irmengarde Eberle, was published in the 1930s. In the article, Eberle, who had experience working for a confessions magazine, dispels the comparison that confession magazines are like tabloids because "confessional magazines offer a channel for self-exposal; the tabloids lay bare the privacies of others."[154] Eberle cited two reasons why the magazines were successful:

> Two things, I believe, are responsible for the amazing circulation of these confessional magazines. One is that the editors, either through instinct or policy, have kept their stories within the experience and comprehension of unsophisticated people. The other, and probably the more important, is that in a country stifled by generations of Puritanism, this is the only kind of air the half-literate can breathe. Just as a nation is usually ripe for war when war finally comes, the American public was ripe for the breaking down of the secrecy and hypocrisy that surrounded any mention of sex.[155]

Michael H. Randall, author of the article "Confession Magazines," published in 1981, explained why confession magazines interested their audience: they appealed to blue-collar people who were often forgotten by mainstream women's magazines; the stories conveyed relatable situations about relationships and family matters; the readers identified with the protagonists, who were typically White, Protestant teenage girls or housewives; and the content supported traditional family values and ideas about gender

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[152] Gerbner, "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," 29.
[153] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 32.
[154] Irmengarde Eberle, "The New Confessional," *The New Republic*, June 4, 1930, 68.
[155] Ibid.

roles. Readers could relate to the protagonists but their tragic or complicated situations allowed the reader to feel better about their own lives.[156]

Confessional stories were controversial and sparked public conversation on topics like women's education, family life, experience in the workforce, marriage and divorce, and sexuality.[157] Earle and Smith identify three key components of confessional style publications: portrayal of a working-class woman or person's situation which doesn't always include a happy ending; the writing that challenges traditional morals and ideas about female sexuality but promotes being responsible; and uplifts working-class women and readers by providing an outlet for sharing their experiences.[158] Mandziuk, author of "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires: Power and Please in *True Story* Magazine," wrote that *True Story's* confessionals served three purposes for its women readers. First, it provided a therapeutic medium which was also a resource with examples of a positive outcomes. Second, it served as a guide on appropriate behavior and customs. Finally, confessions provided a manuscript that could be analyzed when it came to behavior that was deemed unacceptable for women.[159]

The relationship between confession magazines and their readers, who provided content, is a part of a long-standing history of the relationship between publications and readers who submitted content. This is a relationship that dates back prior to the seventeenth century and reader submissions were considered an essential part of

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[156] Michael H. Randall, "Confession magazines," *Serials Review* 7, no. 1 (1981): 43.
[157] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 36-37.
[158] Ibid, 42.
[159] Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires," 174.

publication content. One publication, a newsbook printed in the 1640s, was even titled *Packet of Letters*.[160] The validity of confessionals sparked scrutiny as many questioned how much of the content was original and how much of it was edited or professionally written by the publication's staff writers or freelancers.[161] Macfadden insisted that all of the stories that were published in *True Story* were real stories and that they were only professionally edited for grammatical errors. Despite Macfadden's defense, critics continuously questioned whether the stories were real, and they doubted the high submission rates of confessionals. Arthur McKeogh, author of "The truth about the "True" Story," published in 1927, was one of the biggest critics of confession magazines and their popularity. He even criticized the intelligence level of the readers:

> When the literate venture into this kind of composition, with narratives of their own experiences or those of their friends, the tempo and range of their efforts are rarely sensational enough to satisfy the editor and his audience. No, there are well-formulated rules for the concoction of these stories. Thickly plied tragedy that ends happily. Consummate poverty that becomes wealth. Ill-gotten luxury that finally sees its error, and overnight takes on a sanctified aroma of simplicity and sweetness. Misguided virtue may drag itself through the whole decalogue of sin, but it must come forth shining and triumphant in the last paragraph.[162]

Some observers did not believe that readers could submit enough stories to keep the monthly magazine going.[163] Eberle, provided first-hand insight into what it was like to work for a confession magazine in 1930. Eberle said the manuscripts her publication received came from people from all walks of life and professions and they all had the

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[160] Reader, Bill. *Audience Feedback in the News Media*. (New York: Routledge of Taylor & Francis Group, 2015): 28.
[161] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 40.
[162] McKeogh, "The Truth about the 'True' Story," 415.
[163] Mandziuk, "Confessional Discourse and Modern Desires," 178.

common goal of sharing their experiences and helping others who may have encountered a similar situation:

> These manuscripts came from all kinds of people. Department-store clerks, and their idol the floor walker, contributed generously. Station hands felt moved to tell the stories of their lives, as did the wives of laborers, high-school girls, bellhops, file clerks, stenographers, factory girls, track drivers and even country ministers. Most of the stories were written by hand and in pencil, sometimes on pink stationery, sometimes on brown paper bags slit down the sides and flattened out. The writer frequently told us that he was sending his story to the magazine in the hope that it would reach the heart of someone who had suffered like himself, or in the hope that someone would profit by his experience; but these reasons were obviously afterthoughts. The telling of the stark tale had come first.[164]

It is also worth noting that in the article, Eberle never revealed the name of the confession magazine she worked for early in her career, but she also worked for *Excella Magazine* and *New York Woman* before going on write over 60 books for children and young adults.

Confessions were a candid look into the lives of everyday people, who shared stories, feelings, experiences and thoughts that they may be reluctant to share out loud. A confession published in the February 1920 issue of *True Story,* titled "Under Sentence of Marriage," tells the story of a woman from a rural area who becomes pregnant by her boyfriend during a trip to New York City. She shares how the pregnancy led to marriage and eventually three more children. However, she is not in love with her husband and admits to being unhappy. At the end of the confession, she poses a question to the readers: "Would you have married him?"[165] This story and ones like it were often peppered with lessons or cautionary tales. The lesson in this story was to practice safe sex

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[164] Eberle, "The New Confessional," 69.
[165] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 37-38.

not abstinence, as it is the author's desire and lack of discernment which led to the pregnancy. *True Story* was said to have "legitimized—or at least naturalized—women's sexual desires."[166] In a confession from another issue of *True Story*, titled "Broken Bonds," a woman shares how divorcing her alcoholic husband, lack of job prospects and expectations stemming from a middle-class upbringing led to her living in poverty. To escape her financial woes, she begins to date a wealthy married man. This eventually leads to her becoming a magazine writer and she publishes a novel.[167] This story shared a hopeful outcome, showing that it was possible to escape difficult situations and poverty. Schramm's study and report titled "The World of the Confession Magazine," analyzed the content of 100 confessions stories and found that many of the authors faced troubles relating to family matters and stated that they wanted "a happy and secure family life." Thirty-eight percent of the authors came from divorced homes, forty-four percent discussed marriage troubles, illness and violence as part of their home life.[168]

Eberle found many of the stories that her publication received to be scandalous and many of them were never printed in the late 1920s:

> Many of the revelations were shocking to read, but they were seldom made with any intention to shock. They sprang from the half-recognized hope of gaining some inner freedom through confession. Most of these stories, of course, were never published; they were too crude even for rewriting. But they gave the editors the necessary picture of the public for which the magazine was being printed.[169]

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[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid, 41.
[168] Gerbner, "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine," 37.
[169] Eberle, "The New Confessional," 69.

In 1939, journalist Hope Hale described *True Story* as a pioneering publication that recognized "that people without food got hungry and sometimes even ill, that babies did not always arrive into a softly bassineted welcome, and that sometimes crime, cruelty, disease, and even the sacred course of true love might be effected by economic problems."[170] The practice of readers sharing their most intimate and private situations through public vehicles like magazines and newspapers is one that would continue for decades and could be seen later in pioneering publications such as *Ladies' Homes Journal*.

Ladies' Home Journal began as the "Woman and the Home" section of Cyrus H.K. Curtis' newspaper created in 1879 called *Tribune and Farmer*. The section, which was edited by Curtis' wife Louisa, focused on topics that Curtis thought would be of interest to women readers. Within a few years, the couple was astounded by the success of the section as it developed its own identity and following. In December 1883, Louisa Curtis released the section as an independent supplement to the paper and called it the *Ladies' Home Journal*. By 1884, Cyrus Curtis was an active part of strategizing the periodical's circulation strategy, spending thousands of dollars to advertise the *Journal*. By 1912, the *Journal* had grown to become one of the most successful publications with nearly two million in monthly circulation figures.[171]

One of the most well-known columns from the *Ladies' Home Journal* was "Can This Marriage Be Saved," which was started in 1953. The column had a format that could

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[170] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 35-36.
[171] Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume IV*, 536-49.

be compared to confessions in that it was an intimate look into the romantic lives of the letter writers. The column layout was made up of three parts: a husband and wife would each write to a therapist about their marital problems. Both parties' side of the situation was printed, the therapist would then give the couple advice and a resolution would be shared with the reading audience. Considered both the longest running and most famous column in the history of American magazines, "Can This Marriage Be Saved," provided an intimate look into the often-times most private moments between spouses.[172] At this time, such a public discussion of private issues was considered daring and sometimes oversharing. In a 2014 interview with *NPR*, Sarah Chastain, a 72-year old long-time reader of the magazine, described it as "hugely popular and scandalous."[173] This is reminiscent of many of the views people held about confessions magazines, which straddled the same line as this long-standing column—sharing private moments for public entertainment.

Feminist research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s found confessionals to be a primary resource about the working-class women's socio-economic conditions in the twentieth century. Researchers recognized confession magazines as a community created for both confessional readers and writers. In 1971, researcher Cornelia Butler Flora found that confessional magazines were more likely to show "nontraditional images" of women, such as women working or even as the head of their household. Confession magazines

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[172] Sally Koslow, "What We Lose In Losing *Ladies' Home Journal*," *The Atlantic*, May 1, 2014. https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/05/what-we-lose-in-losing-ladies-home-journal/361520/

[173] Zoe Chace, "Like So Many Magazines, '*Ladies' Home Journal'* Cuts Back," NPR, April 27, 2014. https://www.npr.org/2014/04/27/307340710/like-so-many-magazines-ladies-home-journal-cuts-back

were viewed by researchers as "a space for emotional catharsis" where women could help other women who had similar life experiences.[174] Earle and Smith identify confessionals as a key genre in feminist literature:

> Therefore, the confessional magazines participated in a feminist periodical culture vibrant since the mid-nineteenth century that constituted a virtual network of readers and writers. These new political communities and identity positions for women were based on uniquely feminine social, political, ideological, and cultural bonds that bridged geographic and economic gulfs.[175]

Confession magazines provided entertainment, a source for social commentary as it related to women's issues, sexuality, family life as well as love and romance. The stories also served as cautionary tales that were relatable and oftentimes embedded with lessons for not only the author who experienced it, but the reader in case they ever found themselves in a similar situation.

The Black Press

A census taken in 1790 reflected a Black population of 757,208, which was 19.3 percent of the total U.S. population and although most of this population was enslaved, approximately 7.87 percent of Blacks were free. By 1860, the Black population in America was recorded at 4,441,830, which is approximately 14 percent of the total U.S. population at that time, and 10.99 percent of Blacks were free. Although there were free African Americans, of course they did not experience the same social or political rights and opportunities as White citizens during this time period. It was common for free Blacks to create their own communities, organizations, institutions, churches, schools and

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[174] Earle and Smith, "True Stories From Real Life," 37-40.
[175] Ibid.

libraries in order to have access to rights, opportunities and assistance that they were legally denied.[176] The establishment of the African American press would allow them to share their own stories, using their own experiences, opinions perspectives and voices. According to Penelope Bullock, author of *The Afro-American Periodical Press, 1838-1909,* "…the status of the Negro in American life played a major role in the creation and growth of the Afro-American periodical press."[177]

Despite their American identity, their experience in their home country was marked by discrimination, racial injustice and unequal rights. Kitch reflected on how African American creators were essential in telling their own stories in ways that have never been done before:

> …African Americans, a group whose presence and experience in the United States are central to its history and yet whose stories only recently have become a part of the broader historical narrative.…Such integration has required not merely adding to that narrative, but rethinking it—and doing so has been largely the purview of African American authors, film makers, and journalists… Newspapers written by and for African Americans traditionally have been more historically conscious than the white press, and they have been active, especially during recent decades, in a reconfiguring of American memory.[178]

Black Newspapers

The first Black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, was founded in 1827 by a group of free African American men in New York City.[179] The newspaper's primary goals were to champion abolitionism and contest the negative stories and condemnation printed

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[176] Bullock, *The Afro-American Periodical Press,* 4-6.
[177] Ibid, 4.
[178] Kitch, *Pages from the Past: History & Memory in American Magazines,* 88.
[179] Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Mayberry Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 2.

about African Americans in the White press. The first issue opposed allegations printed by the *New York Enquirer*. The editor of the *Enquirer,* Mordecai M. Noah, was a strong supporter of the back to Africa movement, which proposed that slavery should stay in place and that freed African Americans should return to Africa because it was believed that they would not only be a threat to the institution of slavery but that they would have a difficult time assimilating into American society.[180] The *Freedom Journal*'s prospectus said:

> We shall ever regard the constitution of the United States as our polar star. Pledged to no party, we shall endeavor to urge our brethren to use their right to the elective franchise as free citizens. . . .Daily slandered, we think that there ought to be some channel of communion between us and the public, through which a single voice may be heard, in defense of five hundred thousand free people of colour. For often has injustices been heaped upon us, when our only defense was an appeal to the Almighty: but we believe that the time has now arrived, when the calumnies of our enemies should be refuted by forcible arguments.[181]

Reverend Samuel E. Cornish, who was a known orator with a unique writing flair, served as senior editor of *Freedom's Journal,* and John B. Russwurm, the second African American man to graduate from college, was the junior editor and business manager. Both Cornish and Russwurm started off with a common vision for the newspaper but their individual philosophies led them in opposite directions when it came to their editorial goals.[182] Russwurm believed racism and hostility for free African Americans was deeply embedded into American society and wanted to retreat from the militant reporting style Cornish was known for. The constant disagreements between the two

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[180] Simmons, *The African American Press*, 9-10.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid, 10.

editors led Cornish to leave *Freedom's Journal* and Russwurm continued as editor but, wrote Simmons, he "didn't have Cornish's flair and style for writing biting editorials. Instead, there was hesitation, compromise and uncertainty."[183] By 1829, readership stopped supporting the paper, alleging that Russwurm had "sold out." In March 1929, Russwurm ceased publication and moved to Liberia. Cornish returned as the editor in May 1829 and changed the publication's name to *Rights of All.* Cornish continued to protest slavery and racial injustice, and many credit him as a pioneer in the Black press, illustrating how it could be used as a protest vehicle. Unfortunately, *Rights of All* did not last long, only about six months, as the publication ended in October 1829 due to lack of reader support.[184]

Other protest newspapers soon were started: the *African Sentinel* (1831), the *Albany Argus* (1832), the *Spirit of the Times* (1836), the *Weekly Advocate* (1837), the *Colored American* (1837), the Elevator (1841), the *Emancipator and Free American* (1842), the *National Watchman* (1842), the *Mystery* (1843) and the *Palladium of Liberty* (1844).[185] Black newspaper editors appeared to have a common mission. They often emphasized abolitionist ideologies and protested racial discrimination, while allowing African Americans to tell their own stories and develop their own unique voice within American journalism.[186] Black editors often emphasized the importance of unity, delivered messages to their Black audience and shared with White citizens their humanity

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[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid, 11.
[185] Ibid, 11.
[186] Kitch, *Pages from the Past: History & Memory in American Magazines,* 88.

and mistreatment.[187] From 1827 until African Americans were emancipated from slavery in 1863, there were 42 Black newspapers which protested against slavery and mistreatment of African Americans.[188]

The Civil War and Reconstruction era, between 1861 to 1877, represented a time of uncertainty but also the beginning of a new life for those who were freed from slavery. In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment legally ended slavery and Congress established the Freedman's Bureau to provide support to former slaves. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 was passed to invalidate "Black Codes" or laws put in place by southern states to keep African Americans in an inferior legal and social status. The Fourteenth Amendment, adopted in 1868, reaffirmed the Civil Rights Act and the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteeing the right to vote was passed in 1870. Congress passed the Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871 to "combat" the Ku Klux Klan and similar hate groups, and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was passed to guarantee equal rights in public "accommodations" for Blacks. In the North and South, free African Americans primarily lived in urban areas. Black people living in both regions typically did domestic work and jobs that did not require skilled training. Many former slaves remained in the South and worked as sharecroppers in rural areas, where they lived in poverty and were paid low wages. As industrial changes transformed the American workforce, Black Americans began to move from rural areas to cities and towns, where they hoped to find job opportunities.[189]

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[187] Simmons, *The African American Press*, 5.
[188] Ibid, 20.
[189] Bullock, *The Afro-American Periodical Press*, 5-10.

As life for African Americans changed, so did the role of their newspapers. Charles A. Simmons, author of *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage During National Crises, with Special Reference to Four Black Newspapers, 1827-1965,* discusses how editors of Black newspapers stepped into a new role during this time:

> Since no other organized effort had been established before the end of the war for race members, the Afro-American press with its role of educator and restorer of racial identity shifted to yet another new and totally different challenge. In addition to publishing survival techniques, it made greater efforts to educate the masses by arousing, informing, and mobilizing them. Yet it never relinquished its unified role of protest.[190]

Approximately 115 African American newspapers were founded during the Reconstruction Period including *L'Union* (1862), the *Nationalist* (1865), the *Journal of Freedom* (1865), the *Leader* (1865), the *Colored Tennessean* (1865), the *True Southerner* (1865), the *Colored Citizen* (1867), the *Freeman's Press* (1868), the *Arkansas Freeman* (1869), and the *New Era* (1873). On average, the newspapers lasted about eight years and nine of the newspapers lasted until the start of the twentieth century.[191]

Black newspaper editors during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were usually educated, well-respected men and women who delivered their message with confidence and courage despite the possibility of dangerous consequences for their livelihood and safety. Black newspaper editors collectively faced a few common issues. White citizens who did not like what Black editors published gathered, forming lynch mobs that would physically attack them, kill them, force them to leave town or even burn

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[190] Simmons, *The African American Press*, 1.
[191] Ibid, 15.

down their newspaper offices. Perhaps best known is Ida B. Wells of the *Memphis Free Press*, who fled North amid threats of an angry White mob.[192] In addition to safety risks, there were a few common problems for newspaper editors. There was low readership due to lack of income and low literacy rates within African American communities, and most White readers were not interested in the content. Also, Black newspapers could not obtain advertising contracts because not many African Americans were business owners and therefore in a financial position to buy an ad.[193] Southern newspapers had to be careful not to be too militant because they often relied on relationships with White business owners, and if they printed something that the business owner disagreed with, they were warned to change the tone of the content or the business would sever advertising ties with the publication.[194] Simmons shared how gaining the respect of the Black audience was paramount to a newspaper's success:

> It was essential that black editors show some backbone in their writing to gain black respect and what little readership was available. But showing backbone meant that editors could lose their newspapers, which were essential to survival of the black people, or even their lives. The need for editors to deliver their message with courage continued throughout the nineteenth century until the time of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, when a division over the use accommodation rather than militancy surfaced. This division was primarily concerned with the methods that should be used when seeking ways to elevate the race literally and economically.[195]

The period from 1877 to 1915, is described as the "most dangerous and brutal for Afro-Americans."[196] Black editors continued to face the threat of brutal violence and

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[192] Ida B. Wells. *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
[193] Simmons, *The African American Press*, 5-6.
[194] Ibid, 65.
[195] Ibid, 6.
[196] Ibid, 16.

many resorted to a non-militant editorial approach and reported less about race issues to protect themselves. However, amongst the newspapers that didn't censor themselves were the *Chicago Conservator* (1878), the *New York Age* (1887) and the *Free Speech and Headlight* (late 1880s). Nearly 116 African American newspapers protested racial discrimination and from 1880 to 1890 and over 504 African American newspapers brought awareness to lynching victims and mistreatment by law enforcement.[197] From 1886 to 1923, there was at least one African American newspaper established every year.[198] The NAACP referred to 1889 through 1939 as "the lynching era." The organization's records show that from 1889 to 1918, 3,224 people were lynched—702 were White or Native American and 2,522 were Black.[199]

There is a noticeable pattern throughout United States history where the number of Black newspapers increased as the lynching numbers increased. This may have been due to a need to inform people of the deaths of those who lost their lives to lynching or even to serve as cautionary tale that these injustices were occurring in their communities. According to Simmons, the African American press reported "other alarming news such as the calculated destruction of property, legal and political inconsistencies between the races, overcrowded living areas, street crimes, and race riots…"[200] White newspapers began to take notice of these reports and quoted Black newspapers regarding these topics.[201] Four of the most significant Black newspapers that would be published during

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[197] Ibid, 16-20.
[198] Ibid, 63.
[199] Ibid, 21.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Ibid, 20-21.

this time were the *Jackson Advocate* (1838) in Mississippi, the *Black Dispatch* (1898) in Oklahoma City, The *Chicago Defender* (1905), the *Pittsburgh Courier* (1910).

In 1917, the United States entered World War I, and Black editors shifted their focus to covering the mistreatment of African American soldiers.[202] Newspaper editors discussed the contradiction of America using the slogan "Make the world safe for democracy" amid the racial disparities within the country.[203] Across America, in cities such as Chicago; Memphis, Tennessee; Houston, Texas; East St. Louis, Missouri; Omaha, Nebraska; and Washington, D.C., riots broke out as the populations increased due to the Great Migration. There were housing shortages and lack of other facilities contributed to tension between the races. From 1917 through 1919, the U.S. Justice Department investigated Black newspapers for how they covered the riots, and in November 1919 they published an official report with their findings.[204] By 1927, Eugene Gordon, a Black newspaper specialist, praised the African American press for the level of excellence it had reached. For example, the *Pittsburgh Courier* was one of the newspapers praised for its editorials and features.[205]

In February 1940, the National Negro Publishing Association (NNPA) was formed when newspaper editors, publishers and executives met in Chicago to collectively address the needs and concerns of the Black press.[206] Some of the issues the Negro press

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[202] Ibid, 39.
[203] Ibid, 25.
[204] Ibid, 46-47.
[205] Ibid, 46-50. Note: Another great resource on this subject is *A Question of Sedition: The Federal Government's Investigation of the Black Press During World War II* by Patrick S. Washburn.
[206] Ibid, 70.

faced as World War II approached were the U.S. Navy's recruitment policy and Negro enrollment in the Naval Academy; Negro loyalty to America during the war despite their mistreatment; the possibility of being accused of sedition and disloyalty; employment discrimination and military discrimination. Other issues newspapers faced included low ad revenue, confronting race related issues and editorial philosophies.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, the African American press, which had come to be known as a "fighting press" and a "crusading press," closely monitored the United States government and the mistreatment of African American soldiers. Simmons described how the Black press historically faced the problem of "how to confront a racist issue with some semblance of a united front that would show racial solidarity."[207] He wrote:

> On the surface, it may have looked throughout much of the war as if the government as a unit was out to shut down the Negro press. But not all agencies or departments viewed with alarm the Negro press or its attacks made in the interest of fair treatment of its people. Even though some Negro papers were suppressed, generally the ones with small circulations, most of them enjoyed freedom from suppression.[208]

Black Magazines

The first Black magazine, *The Mirror of Liberty*, was published by abolitionist David Ruggles in New York City in 1838, eleven years after the first Black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal* was founded. Two months later, the *National Reformer* became the second Black magazine and was published by William Whipper in Philadelphia,

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[207] Ibid, 69-70.
[208] Ibid, 87.

Pennsylvania.[209] Early African American magazines focused more on delivering a common message, which was speaking out against slavery and racial discrimination.[210] These magazines also had the goal of representing African American voices. This was much needed, noted Thomas Hamilton, editor of the *Anglo-African Magazine*, who said mainstream publications tended to "write down the Negro as something less than a man."[211] Bullock describes how the establishment of African American magazines was closely linked to their readers' history and existence in American society:

> The overall development of the Afro-American periodical press was influenced by the status of Negroes in American society during the years between 1838 and 1909. This press began in the 1830s as a part of the organized activities of black people who were working for the emancipation of the slave and for the liberation of the free Negro from inequities and restrictions. As the status of free Negroes deteriorated during the 1850s and the early 1860s, they became increasingly alarmed about their situation.[212]

Early periodicals were typically founded in one of two ways: sponsored by an organization or institution or published independently by an individual with no support. The first two Black periodicals fell under the first category. The *Mirror of Liberty* reported on the New York Vigilance Committee, a multiracial organization that helped free slaves through the Underground Railroad and fought for civil rights for free people. Ruggles served as secretary of the committee and had a reputation for being a "controversial" and a "militant Black leader." He was often the subject of newspaper reports due to his affiliation with many civil rights efforts.[213] In 1834, Ruggles

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[209] Bullock, *The Afro-American Periodical Press*, 1.
[210] Johnson and Johnson, "Propaganda and Aesthetics," 2.
[211] Kitch, *Pages from the Past: History & Memory in American Magazines,* 88.
[212] Bullock, *The Afro-American Periodical Press*, 11.
[213] Ibid, 13-16 and 25.

established a bookstore and library with "antislavery publications" and was one of the founders of the New York Philomathean Literary Society. He was a part of several literary societies for young Black men and opened a reading room for Black people "who are despised for their complexion and refused admission to public reading rooms generally, may enjoy the rich benefits which such an establishment furnishes."[214]

The *National Reformer* reported on the philosophies of the American Moral Reform Society.[215] Whipper, a wealthy lumber merchant, who was one of the founders of the American Moral Reform Society, was a prominent activist who participated in multiple delegations for African Americans, the Underground Railroad and cultural societies in Philadelphia. The *National Reformer* published Whipper's essays and reprinted literature regarding the numerous causes Whipper supported. Bullock describes Whipper's dedication:

> Whipper espoused a diversity of causes. Not only the freedom and equality of black people, but also moral reform and moral persuasion, temperance, nonviolence, economics, education, the equality of women and justice for all people were the concerns of Whipper and the National Reformer.[216]

Black magazines experienced a period of inactivity for a few years but became active again from 1854-1863. Free Black people in urban cities founded publications individually and some were funded through their community churches, civil rights organizations and schools. Many of the publication founders were ministers or esteemed community members who worked in a variety of professions. The magazines included

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[214] Ibid, 27.
[215] Ibid, 13.
[216] Ibid, 34-37.

both original and reprinted writings from other periodicals. Not many of the publications included illustrations and the ones that did struggled with quality of such images. For example, the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Magazine* (1841) printed "undistinguishable portrayals of biblical scenes."[217] Seven magazines were published during these years: *Afro-American Repository* (1854), the *New Republic and Liberian Missionary Journal* (1856), *Repository of Religion and Literature and of Science and Art* (1858), the *Douglass' Monthly* (1858), the *Anglo-African Magazine* (1859), the *Lunar Visitor* (1862), and the *Students Repository* (1863). However, by the start of the Civil War many of these magazines were no longer being published.[218]

Black magazine publication did not experience another surge until the 1880s. In many ways, African Americans were still viewed as second-class citizens and Jim Crow laws, especially in the South, reinforced their standing within society. Periodicals printed between 1880 and 1890 focused on the fight for advancement, civil rights, equality, encouragement and highlighting the achievements and talent of Black people. As was the case with many Black newspapers, most of the magazines published during these years did not last long due to lack of advertising, low subscription rates, and an inability to distribute the periodical.[219] By the early 1900s, Black illiteracy rates had drastically decreased, from 79.9 percent in 1870 to 30.4 percent in 1910.[220] The problem of low circulation figures due to low literacy rates was no longer a major issue for Black

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[217] Ibid, 17.
[218] Ibid, 14-18.
[219] Ibid, 64-70.
[220] Ibid, 9.

magazines and many of them began to see higher circulation figures in the upcoming century.

The growth of special interest magazines increased significantly after the Reconstruction period. There were more special interest magazines than general magazines, and these publications often highlighted the various subgroups that developed within the African American population.[221] Bullock explains how the Black experience in American helped foster the growth and development of special interest publications:

> Throughout the United States, black people encountered barriers and inequities, imposed openly or subtly by racial prejudice. As a result, during the post-Reconstruction period, they again concentrated their activities in their own institutions; they again utilized the periodical press to serve their needs in segregated communities and to agitate for acceptance into an integrated society.[222]

There were magazines about business, economics, education, religion and spirituality, entertainment, hobbies and activities, health and medicine, music, and women's issues. Some of the periodicals were sponsored by churches, organizations or schools, and some were published by individuals who created stock companies to fund the magazines.[223] Special interest magazines, which were plentiful, included titles such as: the *Progressive Educator* (1880s), the *Alumni Magazine* of Lincoln University (1884), the *Musical Messenger* (1886), *Ringwood's Afro-American Journal of Fashion* (1891), the *Medical and Surgical Observer* (1894), *Woman's Era* (1894), the *Negro Music Journal* (1902), the *Railroad Porters and Hotel Waiters Magazine* (1902), the *Negro Educational Review* (1904), *Small's Negro Trade Journal* (1906), the *Colored*

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[221] Ibid, 150.
[222] Ibid, 21.
[223] Ibid, 151.

Woman's Magazine (1907), the *School Teacher* (1909), the *Negro Agriculturist* (1909), the *Negro Business League Herald* (1909) and *The Colored Catholic* (1909).

Historically, it was very common for Black publishers to look to mainstream publications for inspiration. For example, The *Anglo-African Magazine* (1859) was modeled after the *Atlantic Monthly* (1857) and the *Southland* (1890) was like *The Forum* (1886).[224] *Future State* (1891), which was known as "the only periodical in the world presenting the opinions of the leading journals upon the Negro" was modeled after *Public Opinion* (1861). *Alexander's Magazine* was also compared to *The Forum* (1886) and *The North American Review*. The *Colored American Magazine* (1900) and the *Voice of the Negro* (1904) were formatted like *McClure's* (1893).[225] This is a pattern that was later mimicked and successfully executed by John H. Johnson with the magazines produced through Johnson Publishing Company. *Negro Digest* was inspired *by Reader's Digest*; *Jet* was modeled after *Quick*; *Ebony* was influenced by *Life* and *Look*; and *Tan Confessions* was inspired by *True Confessions*. This concept will be further explored in the literature review sections on *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions.*

African American periodicals in the late nineteenth century followed a similar path to success as mainstream magazines which benefited from industrialization, decreases in illiteracy, postal regulations that improved distribution efforts, cheap mass production and advertising dollars.[226] In the early 1900s, magazines like the *Crisis* (1910), the organ of the NAACP, along with *Opportunity* (1923) and *Messenger* (1917)

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[224] Ibid, 112.
[225] Ibid, 212.
[226] Ibid, 208.

were important in discussing topics of race relations, and according to Johnson and Johnson, they "played an important part in the Black renaissance of the 1920s."[227] African American periodicals in the 1930s and 1940s commonly addressed the topic of integration and how African Americans could assimilate into American society. After World War II, several changes impacted the expansion of ideas about integration. Johnson and Johnson wrote:

> A series of developments greatly expanded the assimilation of black Americans into the broader society: the extensive Afro-American participation in the war effort both at home and overseas; the reversal of federal executive policy on racial segregation, as in the 1941 creation of a Fair Employment Practices Commission and the 1948 mandating of military desegregation; and the continued judicial undermining of the "separate but equal" doctrine.[228]

At this time many Black writers also shifted their focus to writing about more mainstream topics as they considered themselves "…first as American authors and then as universal writers involved in subjects common to all persons regardless of background or origin."[229] By the middle of the twentieth century, the Black press was recognized as a financial success with magazines such Johnson's *Ebony*, *Jet* and *Tan Confessions,* and John P. Davis*' Our World*, leading the way. According to Bullock, "Throughout the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century, it remained basically a press with a cause and little or no capital."[230] Over time, the Black press became successful but for many years the status of Black people in American society affected the growth and

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[227] Johnson and Johnson, "Propaganda and Aesthetics," 31.
[228] Ibid, 125.
[229] Ibid, 126-127.
[230] Bullock, *The Afro-American Periodical Press, 208*.

mainstream acceptance of the Black press.[231] Scholars identify popular culture African American magazines such as *Ebony, Jet* and *Tan Confessions*, as having played a significant role in sharing and setting standards for "appropriate behavior" for African Americans.[232] This type of standard setting can be seen in both *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* and the letters to the editor for these publications reinforces this idea.

Ebony Magazine

Released in 1945, *Ebony* magazine was inspired by the unique layout of *Life* magazine and *Look* magazine, which featured stories accompanied by large photographic layouts. Johnson found the photographic magazines of the 1940s, like *Life* and *Look*, to be highly influential to their audience and had an impact comparable to television in the 1950s because "they opened new windows in the mind and brought us face to face with the multicolored possibilities of man and woman."[233] In Johnson's own words, he had a clear vision of what *Ebony* would be: "Words and pictures, Black words and pictures, and a holistic presentation of the Black image, showing professionals and entertainers, athletes and doctors and preachers and women and men and children, everybody: This was the idea."[234] Even the title of the publication, *Ebony*, which was suggested by Johnson's wife, Eunice, reflected the idea of Black cultural pride and strength. "It means fine black African wood," she told Johnson.[235]

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[231] Ibid, 210.
[232] Leisa D. Meyer, "'Strange Love': Searching for Sexual Subjectivities in Black Print Popular Culture During the 1950s." *Feminist Studies*, 38, no. 3 (2012): 627-628.
[233] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 155-156.
[234] Ibid, 159.
[235] Ibid.

When *Ebony* debuted in 1945, the United States was two months before the end of World War II. No major American cities had Black mayors, and African American athletes were not allowed to participate in professional sports such as baseball, basketball or football because they were said to be "biologically incapable."[236] During this time, traveling also remained difficult for Blacks, who could not even check into certain hotels. Johnson said, "No matter how much money you had or how many degrees you'd earned, you could never be certain that your hotel reservation would be accepted."[237] Johnson hoped that *Ebony* would balance some of these harsh circumstances of reality by showing another side of African American life that did not often receive coverage. These positive representations would inspire African Americans and encourage change in how they were viewed in society. Johnson wrote in his autobiography:

> In a world of despair, we wanted to give hope. In a world of negative Black images, we wanted to provide positive Black images. In a world that said Blacks could do few things, we wanted to say they could do everything. We believed in 1945 that Black Americans needed positive images to fulfill their potential. We believed then—and we believe now—that you have to changes images before you can change acts and institutions.[238]

The goal of *Ebony* was to feature content that highlighted the most positive aspects of African American communities, through themes such as dignity, hope, recognition and respect. *Ebony* would emphasize cultural pride and highlight achievements to provide inspiration to African Americans so that they too would know what they could achieve. As society steadily changed, Johnson thought it was important

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[236] Ibid, 158.
[237] Ibid, 193.
[238] Ibid, 159.

for African Americans to see themselves adequately represented in the media through photos and stories:

> We were dressing up for society balls, and we wanted to see that. We were going places we had never been before and doing things we'd never done before, and we wanted to see that. We wanted to see Dr. Charles Drew and Ralph Bunche and Jackie Robinson and the other men and women who were building the campfires of tomorrow. We wanted to know what their families looked like, and what they did when they weren't onstage.[239]

Not only did Johnson want to highlight the best moments of African American life for his Black readers, but he also thought it was important for White people to have access to a medium that would give them a glimpse into African American life, so that they would get a chance to see African Americans in a way that they may have never seen before. Johnson shared how aspects of African American life was often ignored in the mainstream press:

> If you had relied on the White press of that day, you would have assumed that Blacks were not born, because the White press didn't deal with our births. You would have assumed that we didn't finish school because the White press didn't deal with our educational achievements. You would have assumed that we didn't get married because the White press didn't print our wedding announcements or pictures of Black brides and grooms cutting cakes. You would have assumed we didn't die, because it didn't deal with our funerals.[240]

Ebony was put together by a team of only three people, which included editor and publisher Johnson, executive editor Ben Burns, and art director Jay Jackson.[241] Editor Burns, a seasoned White journalist from Brooklyn, New York, worked for many African American publications over the span of his 35-year career including Johnson's *Negro*

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[239] Ibid, 156-157.
[240] Ibid, 157-158.
[241] Ibid, 164.

Digest and the *Chicago Defender.* From 1938-1954, Burns served an integral role at JPC. He didn't have any photojournalism experience, but he spent three months putting together the first issue of *Ebony* together from the kitchen table of his apartment.[242] Burns alone worked as the publication's editorial staff as he contacted photo agencies for images, requested articles from freelance writers and worked on the magazine's layout, wrote photo captions and proofread text:

> At home each night I slowly pieced together the magazine, writing much of the text and all the photo captions and headline titles, doing photo layouts, selecting typefaces for body copy and article titles, scaling photographs, proofreading galleys, stripping galley proofs, and laying out the final dummy-page pasteup of the fifty-two-page initial issue. Although I lacked experience in photo journalism and picture magazine editing, I had copies of *Life* constantly in front of me to emulate, and I did so religiously, replicating entire page layouts and seeking to match title types and writing styles as much as possible. The *Ebony* logo in a bold gothic typeface was a copycat of the logo of *Life*. [243]

Burns hired White photographers to take images for the early issues of *Ebony*. During this time, none of the mainstream picture magazines like *Life* or *Look* had Black photographers on staff. *Ebony* worked with well-known Black photographer Gordon Parks in 1946, but he was hired by *Life* in 1948 after *Ebony* failed to make an offer for full-time employment.[244]

As *Ebony* was set to debut, JPC ran into one issue—they needed paper. During wartime the War Production Board (WPB) restricted paper use and magazines, especially new magazines, were often last in line when it came to paper allotment.[245] So they

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[242] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 85.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid, 62.
[245] Ibid, 85.

waited. When the magazine finally debuted in November of 1945, it was fifty-two pages, included fifteen articles and sold for twenty-five cents per copy. The most prominent stories were a profile of novelist Richard Wright; "Slave to banker," a story about 91 year old Richard Robert Wright, a Black businessman who was born a slave but became a banker (the two men shared a first and last name but were different people with different stories); "Catholics and Color," "The Truth About Brazil," and "Jam Session in Movieland." The cover featured a black and white photograph of six White boys and one Black boy who all lived in the Henry Street Settlement in New York. The cover story, titled "Children's Crusade," was written by Reverend A. Ritchie Low, a White pastor who took African American residents of Harlem on an annual vacation to Vermont farms.[246] Johnson would later set a policy that *Ebony* magazine covers would not include group photographs, people who weren't publicly known or children.[247]

When the first press run of 25,000 copies sold out within hours, JPC knew it had a second successful publication on its hands. They printed another 25,000 copies and *Ebony* became the "the biggest Negro magazine in the world in both size and circulation," which was a title previously held by his own *Negro Digest*. To Johnson, it was clear why the magazine had such easy success and was well received by readers:

> We were giving people something they wanted and couldn't get anywhere else—a basic formula for success in any business. From Jackson, Mississippi, from Oakland, California, from Harlem and Washington and Atlanta, from cities and hamlets all over America, came the same message: We've never seen ourselves before in large photographs presented in a positive light unrelated to crime, and we love it.[248]

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[246] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 160-161.
[247] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 86.
[248] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 162.

Ebony was considered innovative during the 1940s because it was the first national Black magazine that did not place its main emphasis on political advocacy and militant ideas, which was common in Black publications of the past, for example the *Chicago Defender* and the *Chicago Whip*. The focus was on the "happier side of Negro life—the positive, everyday accomplishments from Harlem to Hollywood."[249] The magazine primarily published photo spreads and articles highlighting Black achievements, particularly those who were the first, only or best in their accomplishment such as the first Black Navy pilot, the only Black man living in a town in the state of New York and the biggest African American owned beauty parlor.[250] *Ebony* was well-received by other publications, such as *Time*, which published a story called "The Brighter Side." The article noted the obvious influence of *Life* but described *Ebony's* content as a portrayal of "all-around cheeriness." *Time* also referenced Johnson's theory on the representation of African Americans in mainstream magazines: "On its editor's theory that 'most white magazines deal with Negroes as second-class citizens or freaks,' *Ebony* wants to show how normal they are."[251]

Ebony's stories were reprinted by magazines such as *Life* and *Reader's Digest* and some of its articles were quoted in *Time* and *Newsweek*.[252] *Ebony* was loved by its readers not only for shining a light on the positive aspects of Black American culture, but it also highlighted opportunities for African Americans, made suggestions for overcoming life's

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[249] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 88.
[250] Ibid, 94-95.
[251] "The Brighter Side," *Time*, October 1, 1945. Accessed November 13, 2020. http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,776180,00.html
[252] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 122.

challenges, promoted cultural pride, discussed politics and societal issues, and emphasized and defended Black beauty, which often went unrecognized in mainstream publications. Johnson recalled why the celebration of Black beauty was so important:

> We were among the earliest and most passionate defenders of Black beauty… we were astonished by the inability of White Americans to appreciate the beauty. We didn't apologize for it—it was a part of our mission, as we noted in our May 1946 issue. "Beauty," we said, "is skin-deep—and that goes for brown as well as white skin. You'd never think it, though, to look at the billboards, magazine, and pinup posters of America.[253]

Johnson emphasized the importance in celebrating Black beauty because it was not often portrayed by mainstream magazines. By looking at this perspective through social comparison theory, it can be argued that Johnson may have wanted his African American audience to see these portrayals and not only self-assess and compare their own physical attributes to what they saw in *Ebony*, but to also develop a sense of confidence and a celebratory mindset about their own physical image. If the readers saw that Black beauty was being recognized, despite what they were seeing in other magazines, it could positively impact their own self-image and ideals about what they thought was beautiful.

One of *Ebony's* most talked about spreads, as will be further evaluated in the Discussion section of this research, was a celebration of Black beauty through photographs. The feature entitled "Miss Fine Brown Frame," was published in the May 1947 issue of the magazine and well-known photographer George Karger took pictures of Barbara Gonzales, the first Black person to graduate from Sarah Lawrence College.[254]

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[253] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 169.
[254] Ibid.

Burns noted that the articles that made the greatest impact on *Ebony's* sales were those that discussed interracial marriage, African Americans who passed as White, sex, people with body deformities and romances between African American military men and German women during the war.[255] By 1951, *Ebony*'s circulation reached 500,000 per month.[256]

While *Ebony* enjoyed high circulation figures, one of the magazine's most common critiques was that it did not present a balanced view of African American life by only showing the "happy side."[257] Militant Black readers characterized *Ebony*'s lack of coverage on political and racial issues as "selling out" and "Uncle Tomming," and this was commonly addressed in letters to the editor, which will also be discussed in this thesis. Johnson's editorial policy insisted on a non-militant approach when it came to discussing racial politics because he wanted the publication to appear "moderate" to advertising agencies and White media.[258] Like other critics, Burns often challenged his boss's editorial approach and suggested to Johnson that *Ebony's* coverage should be more balanced and reflective of America's racial climate:

> In *Ebony's* pages, however, the forgotten man was the Negro without money, still in the ghetto and still facing bias in so many areas of American life…My never-ending arguments for balance to report some of the worst of racism along with the most significant advances for the Negro went unheeded as *Ebony* increased in circulation. Johnson saw increasing circulation as proof of the success of his formula, and no amount of disagreement on my part could dissuade him from his determination to maintain the sunshine-and-roses spirit. But for all my objections to *Ebony's* racial "happy talk," the journalistic challenge of editing the blossoming magazine was too much to resist. . .I rationalized that I, as a white,

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[255] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 114.
[256] Dingle, *Black Enterprise, 18.*
[257] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 161.
[258] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 94.

> could not persistently challenge Johnson's judgement on racial matters. "I've been a Negro all my life and you're still new at it," he would say to me when we disagreed. How many times was I reminded that a white person can never really know how blacks feel and think.[259]

In an article titled "The Personal Equation: Negro Publisher Achieves Success," which was published in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1952, Johnson told the interviewer:

> "We try to emphasize and play up points on which Negroes and whites can agree, rather than stress points on which they disagree. We try to avoid too much pressure. We feel that the Negro has made a lot of progress in this country, and we want to see him make more."[260]

Johnson's counterargument was that he wanted to provide an escape for readers and believed that the racial climate would steadily improve for African Americans who were obtaining better jobs, making more money than ever before, and experiencing a new quality of life as progress was constantly being made in the fight for racial equality.[261] Looking at Johnson's reasoning through social comparison theory, one could assume that by providing an escape for African American readers that only provided positivity, they may see *Ebony*'s articles and photographs and adopt a more positive, ambitious outlook where they could focus on the opportunities that were available to them as opposed to what societal limitations impacted their daily lives. By seeing examples of successful African Americans, who despite facing the same prejudices, that were able to succeed and attain success, the readers may view their own futures as bright and filled with

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[259] Ibid, 90.
[260] Helen Henley, "The Personal Equation: Negro Publisher Achieves Success," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1952, Ben Burns Papers, Box 19, Folder 7-8, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library, Chicago, Illinois
[261] Burns, *Nitty Gritty,* 94.

opportunity as well. While the barriers of racial inequality were being broken down through political and social justice movements, African Americans could shift their focus to progress.

Burns wanted to "stimulate street talk about *Ebony*" and often pitched cover stories that were eye-catching or explored topics that were typically avoided or shunned by both Black and White media due to being controversial.[262] For example, *Ebony* published an exclusive interview with singer and actress Lena Horne on her private life and career; a story by Jackie Robinson on discrimination in major league baseball and Negro leagues; a feature on childbirth which included photographs of a doctor delivering a baby; a story on marijuana use and its effects on people; an article on venereal diseases which included photographs from a Chicago clinic and even an exposè on the relationship between street gangs and nightclubs in the 1920s and 1930s.[263] After a photojournalism meeting with *Life* magazine's only Negro editor, Earl Brown, in 1946 Burns obtained a couple of the magazine's rejected photo packages from African American stories. He brought the photos back for review and eventually persuaded Johnson to publish a five-page story on the Tennessee race riot which featured graphic, bloody photographs.[264] The content was not the only thing that raised concerns to *Ebony's* audience. Some readers objected to the use of "Ebony" for the magazine's title and were vocal about it in their letters to the editor.[265] After several people complained,

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[262] Ibid, 109.
[263] Ibid, 110.
[264] Ibid, 95.
[265] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 162.

Johnson replied to one of the letter writers, Gertrude Stein, in the February 1946 issue (there is no indication that this is famous novelist Gertrude Stein):

> A name, we said, with apologies to Gertrude Stein, is a name is a name is a name. We added: Whether ebony is an African wood, a concerto [Stravinsky's "Ebony Concerto"], a night club or a magazine, we think it's a good name—alive, dramatic, exciting, colorful. A handful of folks think otherwise, have been writing to us to state their objections. . .1. Ebony means black; 2. What does Ebony mean? On objection No. 1, we enter a dissent based on our contention that there's nothing wrong with black except what whites have done to blacks. As a race, Negroes have much to be proud of. Their achievements stamp black as a color to take pride in. Black is a badge of accomplishment by a people who have stood staunch and steadfast against the worst that is in the white man's soul and yet lifted their heads high through the centuries. Black is and should be a color of high esteem. On objection No. 2, we hope to teach through the medium of *Ebony* what the word means.[266]

As *Ebony's* success continued, there were often remarks that the magazine was not a Black owned publication because some people thought *Ebony* was "too good to be Negro" or even that "there must be whites behind it."[267] As these rumors continuously spread, Burns suggested that Johnson address the claims. He did so by publishing a photo of Johnson along with a column from the founder denying that *Ebony* was a White owned publication:

> Ever[sic] so often some person who refuses to believe that Negroes are capable of publishing a first-rate magazine will drop us a 'love letter' to charge that *Ebony* is really white owned. This month's statement of ownership required by the U.S. Post Office printed in the next column might be a good occasion to note just who does own *Ebony* and even let readers see what he looks like. He is Arkansas-born Johnson, who together with his wife and mother hold 100 percent of the stock of *Ebony* and *Negro Digest* magazines. He is the brains and money behind this enterprise with no strings attached. Johnson is a Negro, as anyone with eyes can see. But we here at *Ebony* like to think that the color of the publisher is important only insofar as it emphasizes his interest in the good and welfare of the Negro people. Because of that concern for the Negro, because we believe in practicing as

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[266] Ibid, 163.
[267] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 129.

> well as preaching about fair employment practices, *Ebony's* staff is interracial though necessarily predominantly Negro. The staff is hired on ability not color.[268]

Despite the criticisms, *Ebony* continued to publish the content Johnson wanted and the circulation figures continued to grow. The fact that people questioned whether African Americans could publish a magazine like *Ebony* speaks to the widespread public perception of the abilities of African Americans at this time. Looking at this through social comparison theory, it can be assumed that some of the African American audience members who questioned the ownership of the magazine may have held self-limiting beliefs about their own abilities as well. Burns and Johnson felt it was important to prove the critics wrong, by sharing that *Ebony*, with all its content and quality, was indeed published by an African American publishing company and specifically mentioned that Johnson's "brains and money" were responsible for the publication.

White magazines at the time relied on subscriptions for sales and circulation, but *Ebony's* success was due to newsstand sales.[269] In fact, 90 percent of *Ebony*'s total circulation was made up of newsstand sales in major cities where African Americans were more likely to have better paying jobs with more disposable income. Most of *Ebony*'s readers were in Northern cities.[270] Instead of working with national distributors, Johnson worked with independent wholesalers in metropolitan areas, and the magazines were sold at select newsstands in Black neighborhoods and at commonly populated areas like subway entrances.[271] At that time approximately 70 percent of the Black population

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[268] Ibid, 130.
[269] Ibid, 109.
[270] Ibid, 120.
[271] "Ebony: Making a New Market Pay Off," *BusinessWeek*, March 22, 1952, Ben Burns Papers.

still lived in the South, where it was difficult to distribute the publication in the 1940s. Although *Ebony* was not able to reach the southern Black audience, it still became the magazine with the highest readership of any Black magazine ever published.[272] In July 1947, *Ebony* became the first African American magazine to be audited by the Audit Bureau of Circulation. In the final quarter of 1946, *Ebony's* peak sales reached 309,715.[273] In "*Ebony*: Making a New Market Pay Off," an article published by *Business Week* in March 1952, it was reported that the magazine's circulation increased by 100,000 per year since its debut in 1945, and by 1952 the circulation had exceeded 500,000.[274]

Advertising in Ebony

Johnson and his staff became known for working with advertising agencies to ensure that the publishing company would have access to advertisements featuring African American models and celebrities. This was an essential part of Johnson's vision, as he wanted his publications to appeal to the Black audience in every aspect. When the first issue of *Ebony* was published in November 1945, the magazine did not feature any advertisements.[275] Despite the magazine's success and high circulation figures, the biggest problem Johnson faced with the ever-growing publication was its lack of advertising.[276] and JPC did not seek advertisements until six months after *Ebony* debuted

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[272] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 120.
[273] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 166.
[274] "Ebony: Making a New Market Pay Off," *Business Week,* Ben Burns Papers.
[275] Ibid, 161.
[276] Ibid, 179.

on newsstands.[277] Johnson's plan was simple. He wanted to prove two things to advertising agencies and major companies: 1) that *Ebony* should be given the same type of advertising placements as *Life* and *Look*, the two picture magazines that inspired it, and 2) that there was a large Black consumer group with buying potential, and that companies were neglecting this untapped market by not advertising in Black publications. Johnson described his approach as "a revolutionary approach—revolutionary from a racial, marketing, and advertising standpoint."[278]

Through social comparison theory, it can be concluded that for African American consumers who did not always see representation of themselves in advertising, this could have a direct impact on their consumer habits and assessment of self when it came to upward mobility, lifestyle and livelihood. Johnson believed in presenting his audience with new possibilities when it came to advancement and quality of life. For many, this may have correlated with access to certain goods and services. So, by expanding advertisements for the African American audience and campaigning for representation, the African Americans in the advertisements may have served as models for making comparisons to oneself or social group. Johnson may have influenced their thoughts about making purchases that would change their quality of life, to emulate those who they saw in the magazines and advertisements.

During the 1940s, many advertising agencies had yet to explore or realize the potential of the Black consumer market, yet was estimated that the Black consumer

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[277] Burns. *Nitty Gritty*, 119.
[278] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 179.

market had an annual buying power of $15 billion.[279] Johnson and Burns often met with the publication's advertising team to brainstorm ways to enter the bubble of mainstream advertising agencies and account executives. Johnson decided to hire a White advertising manager, Irwin J. Stein, who was very knowledgeable about the industry. Johnson's plan was to eventually have Stein train a Black person to take over his position in the future.[280] In the meantime, Stein was sent to meet with various advertising agencies until one agency provided feedback that it made no sense for Johnson to send a White advertising manager to speak on behalf of a Black magazine, and suggested that "If you've got all those intelligent, affluent Blacks reading the magazine, why don't you send one to sell me an ad?" Johnson decided that the agency representative was right and Johnson himself met with advertising agencies. This led to the procurement of their first major advertising contract with Zenith Radio.[281]

Johnson was able to obtain this contract by simply doing research. He knew that Eugene McDonald, founder of Zenith Radio, was interested in Arctic expeditions, so Johnson shared with McDonald a four-page spread that *Ebony* published about Black North Pole explorer Matthew Henson. He also brought him an autographed copy of Henson's autobiography.[282] Johnson used this strategy of learning about potential advertisers and using his knowledge to build relationships. By 1948, *Ebony* featured advertisements from companies such as Beechnut, Capitol Records, Colgate, Elgin

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[279] "*Ebony*: Making a New Market Pay Off," *Business Week,* Ben Burns Papers.
[280] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 121.
[281] Ibid, 180.
[282] Dingle, *Black Enterprise Titans of the B.E. 100s*, 17.

Watch, MGM, Pepsi Co., and Seagram.[283] Johnson knew that in order to appeal to his African American audience, the advertisements featured in *Ebony* would have to be created with the African American consumer in mind. His policy for the type of advertisements he wanted for *Ebony* was very straightforward: No ads for skin-whitening or hair straightening products, which was common in other Black publications.[284] Johnson was known to promote the concept of Black beauty and advertising skin-whitening or hair straightening products would have been a stark contrast to the message that Black was beautiful. This would have promoted ideas that in order to be beautiful, Black people had to alter their skin color or hair texture to fit mainstream ideals of beauty. Looking at this through social comparison theory, it can be assumed that if African Americans were exposed to these advertisements through *Ebony*, it would have resulted in comparisons and self-assessments that lowered their self-esteem. In the May 1946 issue, which featured the publication's first advertisements, the policy for advertisements was stated:

> "We will accept advertisements only of products of use, interest and benefit to your comfort and well-being. For this issue we have rejected fifteen accounts, because the products did not measure up to our standards."[285]

Overtime, this policy became more relaxed as Johnson wanted to generate more advertising revenue and advertisements for items like "good luck charms" and skin bleaching products were approved for advertisements.[286] Readers began to notice this

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[283] Ibid.
[284] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 119.
[285] Ibid, 119-120.
[286] Ibid, 120.

change and complained about the magazine's "deterioration," which resulted in Burns and Johnson cancelling twenty advertisement contracts. Moving forward, *Ebony* would no longer feature advertisements on hair straightening, hair growth products, sex books, skin lightening products or wigs.[287] The promotion of these products reinforced mainstream beauty ideals and went against *Ebony's* goal to celebrate Black beauty. The African American readers who complained may have wanted to prevent the promotion of these products because they understood the effects that they could have on its audience and the human tendency to self-assess with those in a perceived similar status or social group like race.

As previously mentioned, Johnson wanted *Ebony's* advertisements to include African American models so he worked with his advertisers to ensure that they created advertisements that did just that. Some of *Ebony*'s early ads featured recognizable names such as actresses and entertainers. Diahann Carroll, Pam Grier, Jayne Kennedy, and Lola Falana.[288] Johnson's greatest assets during this time was the experience of William P. Grayson, a newspaper advertising salesman who worked at the *Baltimore Afro-American* before joining *Ebony* in 1947, and LeRoy Jeffries of the National Urban League, who joined *Ebony* as the Midwest advertising manager. With the help of Grayson and LeRoy, Johnson established advertising accounts with major corporations such as Chrysler,

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[287] Ibid, 121.

[288] Lee McQueen, "Johnson, John H. 1918–," International Directory of Business Biographies, 2005. *Encyclopedia.com.* Accessed April 07, 2015. http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3448500278.html

General Motors and Sears Roebuck.[289] In December 1948, *Ebony* published its first four-color advertisement, which was also the first to appear in a Black publication (Note: neither Johnson or Burns mention what the advertisement was for in their biographies).[290] Johnson and his staff also worked directly with advertisers by providing them with lists of retailers in Black communities, advised on how to approach Black customers, and even created a film and informational pamphlet, titled "Selling the Negro Market," to give tips on working with Black businesses.[291]

Jet Magazine

After the success of *Negro Digest* and *Ebony*, JPC released their third magazine, a pocket-sized news weekly called *Jet* in November 1951. Inspired by *Quick* magazine, *Jet* was created to give African Americans news updates on current events, entertainment, sports, places, politics and public personalities. Like *Ebony*, the name was specifically selected to exemplify "Blackness." In his autobiography, Johnson described why the name *Jet* was chosen:

> The word *jet* was tailor-made for my purposes. A talking word that sounds its message, jet means on one level a very dark velvet-black. And it means on another level fast, as in the airplane. From these dictionary definitions, it is but one step, and not a long one at that, to the Black American definition of "a fast Black magazine."[292]

The first magazine cover featured Edna Robinson, the wife of boxing champion Sugar Ray Robinson, and the first issue, priced at fifteen cents per copy, sold out on its

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[289] "William P. Grayson, Executive of Jet, Ebony," *The Los Angeles Times.* (October 2, 1993) Accessed April 11, 2014. http://articles.latimes.com/1993-10-02/news/mn-41185_1_executive-vice,
[290] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 190.
[291] "*Ebony*: Making a New Market Pay Off," *Business Week.* Ben Burns Papers
[292] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 206.

first press run. After six months, the magazine reached a circulation of 300,000 copies a week and many nicknamed it "the Negro's Bible."[293] At this point, *Jet* exceeded the circulation of any other Black weekly magazine circulating at the time.[294] According to Christian, *Ebony* and *Jet* became essential literature for African Americans because Johnson prioritized their news, stories and voices:

> *Ebony* and *Jet*, along with other publications founded in the 1940s by Johnson Publishing Company, were staples in African-American communities, because this race of people was marginalized but Johnson made the race prominent, a priority. They were no longer invisible. They mattered. Their stories mattered because Johnson showed how their lives were worthy of being documented in history like other races.[295]

By 1989, thirty-eight years after its inception, *Jet* magazine was still seeing record highs in circulation as it sold nearly 900,000 copies per week.[296] During the 1940s and 1950s, though, JPC was one of the leading African American publishing companies with a notable success streak, but it was not the only one. The Good Publishing Company, based in Fort Worth, Texas, was a prominent publisher of Black magazines owned by Horace J. Blackwell, a prominent African American fashion retailer. After he died in 1949 it was purchased by a White man named George Levitan, whose publications included the following Black magazines: a picture magazine called *Sepia*, which was inspired by *Ebony* and *Look*; *Bronze Thrills*, a romance magazine; *Hep*, *Jive*, *Soul Confession* and *Soul Teen.*[297]

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[293] Ibid, 206-207.
[294] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 167.
[295] Christian, *Empire: The House That John H. Johnson Built, 69.*
[296] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 207.
[297] Christian, *Empire: The House That John H. Johnson Built, 75.*

Other popular Black magazines at the time included: *Our World* (1946); *Drum* (1951), a South African magazine; *The Negro Review*, *Negro Romance* (1950s), a romance comic book by Fawcett Comics; and *Our Sports* (1953) edited by Jackie Robinson. *Our World* was *Ebony's* biggest competition. In his autobiography, Johnson said: "There were other competitors, but *Our World* kept me up more nights than any other publication."[298] *Our World* was owned by John P. Davis, a Black graduate of Harvard Law School who had debated at Oxford University. Johnson described Davis as "colorful, flamboyant, brilliant and multitalented." *Our World* ceased publication in 1955 and in his autobiography, Johnson gave his take on why the magazine ended. He said:

> He was such a multitalented guy, and he was involved in so many different things that he didn't concentrate completely on *Our World*. While he was off making speeches and dealing with the law and other things, I was in the trenches, digging, fighting, worrying, and even crying. In the end persistence and doggedness won out. *Ebony* was not that much better than *Our World*—I simply tried harder.[299]

Tan Confessions Magazine

Five years after *Ebony* debuted, Johnson recognized that he had intentionally developed a strategy to creating his new publications. White magazines with a high African American readership served as a blueprint for his own publications and he used this inspiration to create magazines for an African American audience:

> Whenever I found a White magazine with strong black readership, I brought out a black counterpart, using names which tried to capture the color black, which, in Black America, includes all colors—creams, chocolate, anthracite, plum, café au lait, and burning brown.[300]

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[298] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 190.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Johnson and Bennett, *Succeeding Against the Odds*, 206.

Johnson conducted a reader survey and found that the largest-selling magazines amongst African American readers were White confession magazines.[301] Based on this knowledge, and his creation strategy, Johnson's third magazine, titled *Tan Confessions*, was born. *Tan Confessions* debuted in November 1950 and received a mixed reception from readers, who had grown accustomed to a specific style from the publishing company.[302] Like the two magazines that came before it, *Tan Confessions* was inspired by another well-known publication called *True Confessions* magazine.[303] *True Confessions* featured anonymous submissions of secrets and "true to life" shocking tales from its readers about sex, love, crime, misconduct and other transgressions such as extramarital affairs, interracial relationships, swingers, provocative dancing and street gangs.[304] *Tan Confessions'* content was similar, except, like always, Johnson had the African American reader in mind, which he explained thoroughly in the letter from the editor, printed in the magazine's first issue:

> We hope to be able to reflect a side of Negro life that is virtually ignored in most publications today. It is that part of everyday living concerning the happiness and triumphs, the sorrows and suffering of the troubled heart. Love and romance, marriage and the family are vital concerns of every colored man and woman, no matter what their status in life. Yet these are ignored completely by white publications and only are discussed in most Negro publications in terms of tension and violence that get into police and court records . . . It is the hope of *Tan Confessions* to publish each month the most interesting of these true-to-life stories, to tell the bewildering problems of men and women in love and how they were able to achieve happiness. . . Our main function is to act as a forum where

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[301] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 206.
[302] Badia Ahad, "Confessions," in *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, ed. Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 90.
[303] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 166.
[304] Ahad, "Confessions," 87-90.

> you and the editors can sit down and exchange true experiences for the benefit of all.[305]

From the start of the magazine, Johnson made it clear that the goal for the publication was to chronicle the private and emotional aspects of the lives of Black women from varying backgrounds, regardless of socioeconomic class or education, in both a "public and accessible format."[306] *Tan Confessions* served as a medium where sexuality could be discussed. According to Todd Vogel, "a periodical analyzed as a cultural production creates an ideal stage for examining society."[307] The magazine served as an important forum for expression as it not only discussed sexual topics, but "normalized what might be considered more deviant sexual practices and structured a unique discourse around black sexuality that had yet to be explored in the realm of print culture."[308] Badia Ahad, author of an essay titled "Confessions" in the book *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture* identified *Tan Confessions* as an ideal forum for the conversation it sparked within the Black community:

> By publishing stories written by its readers, *Tan Confessions*, like most confession periodicals, collapsed the boundary between the writer, who generally functions as authority, and reader, who passively takes in information. Instead, the confessional format, specifically its use of first-person narration, presented its stories as though the reader and the writer were one and the same (which they often were), thereby enabling the illusion of a dialogue among peers, if not friends.[309]

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[305] John H. Johnson, "Letter from the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950, 3.
[306] Ahad, "Confessions," 87.
[307] Leisa D. Meyer, 2012. "'Strange Love': Searching for Sexual Subjectivities in Black Print Popular Culture During the 1950s," *Feminist Studies*, 38, no. 3: 629.
[308] Ahad, "Confessions," 87.
[309] Ibid, 88.

Johnson's first letter from the editor described the publication as one that belonged to the reader in every aspect. In fact, the magazine was introduced as a collaboration between the readers and editors, in which the readers were encouraged to help "planning" content through the submission of confessions.[310] The magazine's content was diverse in that it wasn't made up of only confessionals and included in each issue "Letters to the Editor" and "Teen Talk" by Jane Walters. However, the bulk of content could be found in the three main sections: "Stories from True Life," "Special Features" and "Home Service Magazine." Each issue sold for twenty-five cents and also available at a yearly subscription price of two dollars.[311]

Not only did Burns act as the founding editor of *Ebony* from 1945-1954, but he also served as the executive editor of *Tan Confessions*. While working for *Ebony*, Burns observed what he referred to as "a rather straitlaced attitude toward nudity even among urban, middle class Negroes who would have to constitute most of the potential readership."[312] The readers of *Ebony* were opposed to the publishing of provocative photographs or stories that were of a sexual nature. Burns felt that although romance and confession magazines were popular amongst "less educated blacks," he was not convinced that *Tan Confessions* would be successful.[313] Soon after publication, the magazine reached a circulation of 300,000 per week – the circulation figures reaffirmed what Johnson had learned from his reader surveys.[314]

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[310] Ibid.
[311] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950.
[312] Burns, *Nitty Gritty*, 206
[313] Ibid, 206-207.
[314] Ibid, 167.

Although *Tan Confessions* was created primarily for African American women and race often impacted the details of the stories they shared, one thing it had in common with White confession magazines like *True Story* was that it sought to, in Ahad's words, "create a cultural medium for those women who were virtually ignored by mainstream print culture."[315] *Tan Confessions* was unique in that it provided an open forum and public discussion of Black women's sexuality in a way that had never been done in printed publications. Ahad described *Tan Confessions* as medium that promoted open conversation about Black women's sexuality:

> Thus, while *Tan Confessions* aimed to caution working-class black women about the hazards of being sexually loose, it also invited these women to express and share their sexual narratives, thereby allowing an open exchange around the previously silenced subject of black female sexuality.[316]

Tan Confessions Content

In this thesis, the author reviewed 24 issues of *Tan Confessions* from November 1950 to October 1952, and 12 issues of *TAN*, which the magazine was renamed, from November 1952 to October 1953. In each issue, the "Stories from True Life" section featured five to seven racy and dramatic true-life stories of love, marriage, sex, relationships, and heartbreak. Accompanied by photo re-enactments with Black models, the stories shared the personal, secret, and at times, shameful moments as told by the anonymous writers. In each issue, the staff published an open call seeking submissions of dramatic "true stories of Negro life and romance."[317]

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[315] Ahad, "Confessions," 88.
[316] Ibid, 87.
[317] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950.

In a book titled "*Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture that Made Them,"* author Noliwe M. Rooks provides an overview of the history and development of African American women's magazines in context of race relations and sexuality, and *Tan Confessions* is one of the publications highlighted. The author's examination of *Tan Confessions* begins with an analysis of the cover of the December 1950 issue of the magazine. The author describes the depiction of an African American couple embracing as if they are about to kiss as a "visual narrative of a significant aspect of the magazine's content, aims, and editorial concerns."[318] Rooks describes the cover image in the following way:

> The image of a slim, scantily clad African American woman fills three-quarters of the page. She reclines across and substantially covers the prostrate body of an African American man. Her manicured fingers stroke his face; her heavily lipsticked mouth is slightly parted; her eyes gaze longingly down from beneath precisely plucked eyebrows. She leans in for a kiss. It is an image of sexual self-assurance and a promise of a longing soon to be fulfilled. Though the cover image asks viewers to join what would appear to be an intimate moment, she, focused solely on what she desires, offers neither a coy smile or the inclusive gaze viewers might have expected. Indeed, the model spares no glance in the direction of her audience. We are witness to an interaction that, though enacted on the public space of a magazine cover, is coded as private. In short, the cover makes clear that *Tan Confessions* believes African American female sexual desire to be a commodity suitable for public consumption. Indeed, such desire can be purchased for the twenty-five-cent cover price.[319]

The magazine's cover reflected the intimacy detailed in the "Stories from True Life" section of the magazine. *Tan Confessions* encouraged writers to tell true stories in their own words using fictitious names of characters and locations to protect their identities. The confessions, which are not bylined, included tales of love, heartbreak,

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[318] Rooks, *Ladies' Pages,*120.
[319] Ibid.

family issues, marriage, sex and relationships and appeared underneath eye-catching headlines such as "I Married a High School Boy,"[320] "Who Was My Baby's Father?"[321] "Guilty Mother,"[322] and "My Affair with Royalty."[323]

"I Married a High School Boy," is the story of a small-town girl who met her future husband while in high school. As an eighteen-year-old senior, Mary was somewhat reluctant to admit that she had a crush on fourteen-year-old Roger, a freshman. By the time Roger was a senior and Mary was twenty-two, the pair were practically inseparable. Their relationship was known amongst their friends, but the situation was a surprise for Roger's mother. In this excerpt, Mary recalls the night when Roger's mother found the pair hanging out at Mary's job:

> "I want you to leave my son alone. Do you understand?"
> My reply was instant. "That's for him to decide. We love each other."
> "What does he know about love? Don't you know he's just eighteen? We are going to make a dentist of Roger. He's in school!"
> "I've not interfered in any way with Roger going to school," I said. "I know he's just eighteen."
> She spoke slowly, in a level tone. "Leave him alone or I'll hound you out of town. He's a minor."[324]

"Who Was My Baby's Father?" tells the story of Bea, a woman torn between two men and the dilemma of not knowing which man fathered her son. David, the man she loves, travels often for work and in his absence, she fell into an affair with Stan. In this excerpt, Bea describes the moment her son is born:

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[320] "I Married A High School Boy," *Tan Confessions*, December 1950, 32.
[321] "Who Was My Baby's Father?" *Tan Confessions*, February 1951, 18.
[322] "Guilty Mother," *Tan Confessions*, April 1952, 17.
[323] "My Affair with Royalty," *Tan Confessions*, July 1952, 32.
[324] "I Married A High School Boy," *Tan Confessions*, December 1950, 73.

> I fought my way back to consciousness through a thin veil of pain, all that remained of the black nothingness of labor I had just experienced. As if from a great distance I saw the efficient, square-jawed nurse standing by my bed holding in her arms a blanket-wrapped bundle. "You've got a fine baby boy, Mrs. Sparks," she said with a smile. "Seven pounds, three ounces. His father will certainly be proud!"
> The words that should have made me the happiest woman alive brought a flood of stinging tears to my eyes and I twisted my face on the pillow to hide my shame and anguish. "Yes," I silently agreed, his father would be proud. But--*who* is his father?"[325]

These stories, which were often filled with confusion, disappointment, heartache and in some instances, tragedy, served as "cautionary tales" for women who might find themselves in similar situations. Despite the situation and circumstances, once the woman came to understand her wrongdoing, the story usually concluded with a "happy ending:"[326] As Ahad writes:

> The audience ability to bear witness to and learn from their experiences demonstrates the extent to which the magazine allowed for a conversation around psychosocial and psychosexual norms, even in their complicity with the conservative impulses of the moment.[327]

A perfect example of this type of tale is "Strange Love," a confession that appeared in the inaugural November 1950 issue. This is the story of Yvonne, the wife of an attorney, who finds herself having an affair with another woman. In the end she reunites with her husband who forgives her discretion.[328] Despite the controversial nature of *Tan Confessions*, Ahad recognizes the magazine as a significant domain for sparking

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[325] "Who Was My Baby's Father?" *Tan Confessions*, February 1951, 18.
[326] Ahad, "Confessions," 94.
[327] Ibid, 93.
[328] Ibid, 128-129.

conversations related to women's sexuality, which was a topic that was considered taboo during the time of publication:

> Ironically, in its attempt to instantiate a kind of sexual conservatism among its readers, *Tan Confessions* inadvertently created a productive space in which the politics of black female sexuality were able to freely articulate their own sexual lives. While these women's stories may have been deemed deviant within conservative black social and cultural spheres, it is noteworthy to consider how their confessions may have reflected a more popular and liberal idea of feminine sexuality outside of this space."[329]

Ahad's essay also explored the therapeutic nature of *Tan Confessions.* For women who may not have had access to resources such as therapy, a magazine like *Tan Confessions* provided a safe space for discussing their life problems and offered a public forum for "self-help."[330] This is significant because the magazine then takes on a dual-role for the reader as a source of entertainment but also a source for help with "life strategies these narratives offer."[331] Throughout history, African American women have often been expected to act in a particular manner, in order to combat negative stereotypes concerning African American women and women's sexuality.[332]

Considering the idea of sexual conservatism among readers is key because this is a topic that was commonly discussed in the letters to the editor. Readers of the magazine, which included a large teenaged following, sometimes questioned if the material was too sexy, explicitly detailed or risqué. Some found the material "trashy" or "low level literature" and a lot of this relates back to conservative ideas about women's sexuality

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[329] Ibid, 95.
[330] Ibid, 85.
[331] Ibid, 92.
[332] Ibid, 87.

and appropriate behavior. Through social comparison theory it can be assumed that perhaps concerned readers did not want teenaged readers or women to read *Tan Confessions* and adopt the ideals and behaviors of the confession's protagonists, which were often considered scandalous or raunchy.

Tricia Rose, author of *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy*, identified "beauty parlors, kitchens and health clubs" as spaces where African American women could share such personal stories. *Tan Confessions* became one of these "safe spaces" where women could both publicly and privately share these stories:

> Owing to their exclusion from legitimized venues of therapeutic culture as a result of both racist practices and economic limitations, it is precisely in the space of the confessions magazine that their emotional and psychical lives acquire a greater meaning through communal sharing and exchange.[333]

The "Special Features" section of the magazine often included exclusive content related to celebrities and other topics. Two of the reoccurring columns titled "How He Proposed" and "If You Married..." appeared in several issues of *Tan Confessions*. The "How He Proposed" column, which appeared in twenty-five issues, invited readers into the love lives of celebrities and celebrity wives, who shared the story of their relationships and engagements. The column featured stories from names such as Rachel Robinson, wife to Brooklyn Dodgers baseball player Jackie Robinson,[334] and Lucille Wilson, wife to jazz singer and trumpet player Louis Armstrong.[335] "If You Married...," a column that appeared in the first six issues of *Tan Confessions*, welcomed the readers to

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[333] Ibid, 86.
[334] Rachel Robinson, "How He Proposed," *Tan Confessions*, January 1951, 5.
[335] Lucille Wilson, "How He Proposed," *Tan Confessions*, March 1951, 5.

imagine what their lives would be like had they married celebrity men such as movie star Jimmy Edwards,[336] actor Sidney Portier,[337] and piano stylist Errol Garner.[338] These articles, an obvious form of entertainment, appealed to a woman who may have fantasized about what it would be like to be married to a talented, famous celebrity.

The magazine also published exclusive, notable additions, such as the "Book Length Serials" section, which included the seven-part "Lena Horne's Own Story," appearing in the first seven issues of the magazine published between November 1950 and April 1951. In the series, the actress shares her life story including memories of her childhood, career, romantic relationships and family life.[339] Josephine Baker's "My Life Story," a similar multi-part series, appeared in the June 1951-October 1951 issues. In the five-part series the actress and singer discussed life before fame, her career in show business, her success in Europe and her return to America.[340] These special features provided a behind-the-scenes look at the lives of celebrities in their own words.

The articles in the "Home Service Magazine" section can be classified as content that has typically been found in women's magazines throughout history. The stories catered to domesticity and topics believed to be of concern to women such as beauty and hair care, health, childcare, home decor and appliances, fashion, organizing events, cooking and recipes, and holiday event planning. A perfect example of the type of content commonly featured in the "Home Service Magazine" included articles such as

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[336] "If You Married...Jimmy Edwards," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950, 30.
[337] "If You Married...Sidney Portier," *Tan Confessions*, December 1950, 28.
[338] "If You Married...Errol Garner," *Tan Confessions*, February 1951, 26.
[339] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950.
[340] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, June 1951.

"Suggestions for Your Christmas List,"[341] "Linen Shoes for Spring,"[342] "Good Taste in Perfume,"[343] "Your Child and Nursery Care,"[344] "Choose the Right Face Powder,"[345] and "Apples are Versatile."[346] Rooks made the following observations about the magazine's content organization:

> The articles were interspersed with first-person accounts in the Special Features section, written by African American women (such as Sarah Vaughn and Lena Horne) who were celebrities. In these narratives, they told of marriage, life, and hardship in ways often indistinguishable from the more sensational stories of sexual intrigue that formed the bulk of the publication. As a result of the inclusion of both the Home Magazine and Special Features section, *Tan Confessions* becomes a publication that first creates, and then struggles mightily to commodify, tensions between didactic instruction about "proper" behavior, attitude, and appearance with the confines of an urban home and marriage, and cultural fantasies about African American female sexual desire outside of that arena.[347]

Finally, *Tan Confessions* occasionally published columns like "Your Handwriting," an analysis on handwriting styles[348]; "Poems of Devotion," which featured poetry[349]; "Real Life Dramas," on news and current events[350] and "On the Records," a music review column[351] and *TAN* featured "Dearly Beloved: A Forum on Marriage Problems," a love and relationships column starting in January 1953.[352]

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[341] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, December 1950.
[342] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, March 1951.
[343] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, June 1951.
[344] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, September 1951.
[345] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, February 1952.
[346] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, October 1952.
[347] Rooks, *Ladies' Pages,*121-122.
[348] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, October 1952.
[349] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950.
[350] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, January 1951.
[351] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, December 1950.
[352] "Table of Contents," *TAN*, January 1953.

After its debut, *Tan Confessions* received mixed reactions from readers who were familiar with JPC's publications. From September through December 1950, *Tan Confessions* published letters from readers who both supported and criticized the publication. The topic of "Black respectability" was commonly discussed amongst readers, who used *Tan Confessions* and its content as an example when identifying their stance on the issue. Many readers expressed that they felt that *Tan Confessions* had a responsibility to the Black community, which meant not exposing the sexual behavior of African American women.[353]

Some readers viewed *Tan Confessions* as a greater than representation of African Americans. Whether the magazine portrayed confessions or other content, they wanted what they considered to be respectable and accurate representation for their racial group. This aligns with the ideologies of social comparison theory where one will strive to self-evaluate by comparing themselves to those within their social group because they would compare their own values to those represented by other African Americans in the magazine. If the values of the subjects within the magazine did not match the reader's own values it is possible that the individual, seeking accurate self-assessments, would view this as a negative representation. According to Ahad's analysis, an example is a reader who was opposed to the magazine before reading the first issue. The letter said: "[I]t wasn't bad enough that you put all that smut into *Ebony* but now I read where you are going to have a whole magazine devoted to sex."[354] Another opposing reader said:

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[353] Ahad, "Confessions," 90.
[354] Ibid.

"Let me say now—even before I see your rag in print—that I object to seeing this kind of publication aimed at the Negro market. Confession magazines exist merely to titillate the sense of unreality common to uneducated people."[355] One reader who supported the publication said: "I can say with sincerity that it has made quite an impression....By that I mean as I read the frank, to-the-point stories and articles about Negro love problems, sex and careers, it gave me a feeling of realness."[356] The publication maintained a polarizing effect on readers, causing some to threaten to boycott the magazine in public places and others to support the publication as another Black -owned publication that provided a platform for their stories.[357]

Despite the controversial nature of *Tan Confessions*, Ahad recognized the magazine as a significant forum for sparking conversations related to women's sexuality:

> Ironically, in its attempt to instantiate a kind of sexual conservatism among its readers, *Tan Confessions* inadvertently created a productive space in which the politics of black female sexuality were able to freely articulate their own sexual lives. While these women's stories may have been deemed deviant within conservative black social and cultural spheres, it is noteworthy to consider how their confessions may have reflected a more popular and liberal idea of feminine sexuality outside of this space."[358]

Confession magazines served as an outlet for women who wanted to express their romantic woes and sexual experiences. However, Badia found that *Tan Confessions* and White magazines like *True Story* and *Real Confessions* were viewed differently by the public:

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[355] Ibid.
[356] Ibid.
[357] Ibid.
[358] Ibid., 95.

> Mainstream magazines like *True Story* and *Real Confessions* could safely provide steamy accounts of white women's sexual exploits because white women's bodies had not been treated as biologically overdetermined and any deviance from sexual norms was read as individual aberration rather than generic disposition. But *Tan Confessions* could not operate with such hubris.[359]

Historically, African Americans have tried to control their own image in order to combat stereotypes that have often been promoted in mainstream media. This is something that was emphasized from very early in the establishment of the Black press. The publications wanted to present their own self-images and fight against misconceptions, stereotypes and slander against them. This cognizance of image is one that is still commonly held by African Americans, including African American women, whose bodies and sexuality have also been the subject of stereotyping. *Tan Confessions* was not well received by some readers who wanted to maintain the idea of sexual conservatism. Viewed through the lens of social comparison theory, this is representative of the African American audience looking at the content of the publication and comparing their own ideals and values about how African Americans should be represented, as this as a reflection of themselves and their racial group.

Tan Confessions was published for two years and in October 1952, it was renamed *TAN* and marketed as a homemaker's magazine although the content remained similar to what was previously printed. Throughout the years, the magazine changed names and purpose again as it tried to appeal "to the mushrooming teen-age market." In late 1971, the magazine was renamed *Black Stars* and refocused the content to primarily

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[359] Ibid, 89.

feature celebrity-oriented stories. *Black Stars* ceased publication in 1981 as JPC faced financial difficulties and laid off 75 of their 325 employees.[360]

Advertising in *Tan Confessions*

Over the years, media from Black -owned companies were believed to be platforms for the African American voice and issues that affected them, such as economic, political and social problems that had plagued Black communities since the end of slavery in the United States. The advertisements featured in these publications were an important part of the magazines. In the 1950s, advertising made up 60 percent of the content featured in Black publications. This represented more than half of the publication's space, enabling advertisers to control what images African American readers saw and what products would be promoted to them.[361]

In her study, the *Ladies Pages*, Rooks identifies product consumption as a way for African Americans to connect with the larger society by acquiring goods that were socially acceptable. They were able to identify themselves as being just like everyone else.[362] Product consumption could be viewed as an act of upward mobility and progression. One of Johnson's main goals with *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* was to tell of the achievements, progress and detail the relationship experiences of African Americans, and use these stories to inspire the African American audience. This relates to the idea of an individual looking to a reference point within a social group. That reference point is

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[360] Christian, *Empire: The House That John H. Johnson Built,* 137.
[361] Michael Leslie, 1995. "Slow fade to?: Advertising in Ebony magazine, 1957-1989," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 72, no. 2: 426.
[362] Rooks, *Ladies' Pages,*17.

then used by an individual when comparing oneself in social comparison theory. In a 1985 interview with *Ebony*, Johnson reiterated the importance of using African American models in his magazines:

> These things are accepted today, but they were new in the '40s... There were no major black models before *Ebony*, and there were few black salespeople for major companies before *Ebony*. I don't think we're completely responsible, but I don't know anyone who is more responsible.[363]

JPC was able to successfully establish strong relationships with major corporations for the advertisements featured in *Ebony.* However, this did not initially carry over to *Tan Confessions.* In the first two issues of the magazine, the only advertisements featured were house ads for JPC publications. These advertisements were full page promotional pieces for *Negro Digest, Ebony* and *Tan Confessions,* which included information on upcoming stories and mail-in subscription forms. Johnson was known to work with advertisers to ensure that they featured African American models for advertisements that appeared in *Ebony,* so when he finally secured a contract with Chesterfield Cigarettes, this ideology carried over to the ads published in *Tan Confessions*. The magazine's first advertisements, a full-page ad for hair ointment as well as a full back-page ad for Chesterfield Cigarettes, appeared in the third issue in January 1951.[364] Chesterfield Cigarettes, a brand that was popular in the 1940s and 1950s, was a well-known sponsor of radio and television shows and often produced ads featuring African American public figures such as jazz singer and trumpeter Louis Armstrong,

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[363] "John H. Johnson, The Voice of Black America," *Entrepreneur*. Accessed April 25, 2015 http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/197650

[364] "Table of Contents," *Tan Confessions*, January 1951.

professional baseball player Roy Campanella, professional boxer Sugar Ray Robinson, and professional baseball player Willie Mays.[365]

[365] Backpage advertisements featured in *Tan Confessions* from January 1951- October 1952.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The sources for this research are composed of primary sources, such as Johnson Publishing Company articles and internal documents from the Ben Burns Paper Collection from the Chicago Public Library; three volumes of *Tan Confessions* from 1950-1953*,* which are available on microfilm from Ohio University's Alden Library; and two volumes of *Ebony* from 1950-1952, which were accessed through Ohio Wesleyan University's Beeghly Library electronic database, MasterFILE Premier. The thesis also cites information from secondary sources, such as academic journal articles, books, and online and print news articles.

Letters to the Editor

This study analyzes the first two volumes of *Ebony*, from November 1945 to November 1947 and three volumes of *Tan Confessions,* volumes one and two, from November 1950 to October 1952. These years were selected for researching *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* because they are the first two years of the magazine's publication and provide a glimpse at the early content and letters printed by the magazine editors. There were 619 letters to the editor— 350 letters *Ebony* and 269 letters from *Tan Confessions*. The author read every letter and each letter was assigned a value based on the researcher's five-point scale from Very Positive to Very Negative. The study also looks at the content included in both publications and through the theoretical lenses of social comparison theory, the researcher analyzed the letters to examine how *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* editors represented the voice of the audience through the letters published. As Reader's research concluded: "Through the gatekeeping process, feedback features

became more reflective of editors' ideals about public discourse than broader society."[366] The letters to the editor published in *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* represent the editors' views of how the audience interpreted their content.

Measuring Audience Reaction in Letters to the Editor:

The researcher read all of the 619 letters to the editor and assigned a value to measure the perceived audience reaction amongst the letters that were published. The researcher created a five-point value scale that included the following values: Very Positive, Somewhat Positive, Neutral, Somewhat Negative and Very Negative. The following explanations detail how each value is defined:

1. Very Positive - Uses language that expresses strong like and/or appreciation of the publication and its content. A very positive reaction does not include any criticism or language showing a dislike for the publication or its content.
2. Somewhat Positive - Uses language that expresses like and/or appreciation of the publication and its content but also includes some criticism or shows a dislike for the publication or its content. Overall, the letter is more positive than negative.
3. Neutral - Uses language that does not clearly express like and/or appreciation nor criticism and/or dislike for the publication and its content.
4. Somewhat Negative - Uses language that expresses dislike for the publication and its content but also includes some complimentary language and/or shows appreciation for the publication and its content. Overall, the letter is more negative than positive.

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[366] Reader, *Audience Feedback in the News Media*, 62.

5. Very Negative - Uses language that expresses strong dislike or criticism for the publication and its content. A very negative reaction does not include any compliments, expression of liking or appreciation for the publication and its content.

According to these definitions created by the author, each of the 619 letters to the editor were assigned a value and organized into a spreadsheet according to the publication date, volume number, issue number, letter number, subject header, author name, author title or organization, author gender, geographical region of the letter writer and the audience reaction value. The spreadsheet is on file with the author and it is available for review.

Common Letter Themes

After reading each letter and assigning a reaction value from the five-point scale, a list of the most common themes and subjects from each publication was compiled and the letters were organized accordingly. The most common themes in *Ebony's* letters to the editor that were published were: "Military readers, name requests for magazine/name change requests, international readers (non-military), White readers, the adoption of biracial babies in the UK, the topic of "Black trash," *Ebony* magazine covers (*Ebony* was a picture magazine), editorial content/format/appearance, advertisements, Ebony clubs, shared copies, celebrities, Miss Fine Brown Frame Evelyn Sanders, sexy/risque topics, Black publications focusing on race, racial image/pride.

The most common letter themes of the letters to the editor that were published in *Tan Confessions* were: comparing *Tan Confessions* to *Ebony* and *Negro Digest*, teens and

teen readers, longer stories wanted, military readers, celebrities, romance/confession/women's magazines, representation of average Negro vs. Rich Negro, image/pride, people who doubted confessions, "trash," magazine "for Negroes"/ sharing Negro stories, readers who found the magazine educational/helpful, Tan Pal Club, White readers, shared copies/word of mouth on magazine, Home service section of magazine or other non-confessional content, marriage, and magazine models. Some of the letters, from all three publications, can be categorized under multiple themes and were listed under multiple theme lists, and some letters did not fall under any of the most common themes and were not listed.

Previous research on letters to the editor found that editors practice a form of gatekeeping when editing and selecting the letters for publication. The decision to group the letters under headers and titles is an extension of this practice and demonstrates how editors create their own perception of audience feedback.[367] For these reasons, the letters that are published do not necessarily serve as accurate representation of audience feedback amongst a publication's reading audience. This will be further discussed in the results/findings and discussion sections.

Organizing and Analyzing the Magazine Articles

When analyzing the content within each magazine's articles, the content list from Beeghly Library's electronic database, MasterFILE Premier was used to compile the list of articles from volume one and volume two of *Ebony*. The database, which has a record

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[367] Reader, *Audience Feedback in the News Media*, 66.

of all issues of *Ebony*, listed the name of each article along with a detailed summary of the article's content and a list of content categories associated with the article's most common themes. Volume one included approximately 274 articles and volume two included approximately 252 articles. The table of contents was used to compile a list of all articles from volume one and volume two of *Tan Confessions* and volume three, titled *TAN*. Volume one of *Tan Confessions* included 250 articles, volume two included 183 articles and volume three, *TAN*, included 186 articles. After reviewing each article in *Ebony, Tan Confessions* and *TAN*, the researcher compiled a list of 25 content categories based on the most common article themes and subjects. The categories are the following: Biography/People Profile, Beauty/Fashion, Business, Celebrities, Community/Society, Culture, Education, Family, Finance/Economy, Food, Health/Medicine, History, Lifestyle/Home, Literature, Love/Relationships, Military, Music/Arts, News/Current Events, Politics, Race, Religion, Retail/Commerce, Science/Nature, Sports and Travel.

The list of article titles from *Ebony, Tan Confessions* and *TAN* were organized into spreadsheets according to the article details. However, the author only assigned one categorization based on the most prominent topic of the article. There was no separate category for confessional articles because most of them fall under love/relationships.

Chapter 4: Results/Findings

This section outlines the findings from analyzing the audience reactions found within the letters to the editor that were selected for publication, the most common themes found in these letters to the editor and the types of content found in *Ebony*, *Tan Confessions,* and *TAN*. All of the information in the results/findings section will be analyzed and discussed in the upcoming Discussion section.

Letters to the Editor

This study analyzes a total of 619 letters to the editor from volume one and two of *Ebony* and volume one and two of *Tan Confessions*. This section of the thesis will take a more in depth look at the findings on the writers of the letters to the editor by providing a breakdown of each volume and the letter writers' geographical location, gender and audience reaction to the publication. There will also be a list of the most common themes discussed in the letters to the editor that were selected to be published. These will be key components in assessing how the magazine editors represented audience reaction in both *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions.* As we know from Grey and Brown's previous research on letters to the editor, the letters published cannot serve as accurate representation of audience feedback because the letters published do not include all letters submitted by readers. Also, the process of selecting and editing the letters prior to publication represents how publication editors play a significant role in framing audience feedback for the readers. The researcher will then perform a textual analysis of the letters published through the scope of social comparison theory and this will be examined in depth in the thesis discussion section.

Location of Letter Writers

Volume one of *Ebony* (November 1945-October 1946) featured 149 letters to the editor. The magazine, which had readership all around the world, was largely circulated and read by an American audience from large urban cities such as New York City, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis and Washington D.C. This was largely due to Johnson's distribution strategy—he worked with independent wholesalers in large metropolitan areas to stock magazines at newsstands and high traffic areas like subway stations. Out of the 149 letters to the editor from volume one, 52 letter writers (34.90 percent) were located in the Eastern region of the United States; 41 letter writers (27.52 percent) were located in the Midwestern region of the United States; 24 letter writers (16.11 percent) were located in the Western region of the United States; 18 letter writers (12.08 percent) were located in the Southern region of the United States and 13 letter writers (8.72 percent) were from international locations, such as Belgium, Bermuda, Canada, England, France, Germany, Guam, Japan, Panama, the Philippines and the Virgin Islands. Only one letter (0.67 percent), printed in the December 1945 issue, did not include the author's location.

The second volume of *Ebony* (November 1946-October 1947) featured 201 letters to the editor. Seventy-two letter writers (35.82 percent) were located in the Eastern region of the United States; 55 letter writers (27.36 percent) were located in the Midwestern region of the United States; 21 letter writers (10.45 percent) were located in the Western region of the United States; 21 letter writers (10.45 percent) were located in the Southern region of the United States and 31 letter writers (15.42 percent) were from international

locations, including Argentina, Barbados, Brazil, British Guiana, Canada, Cuba, England, Guam, India, Jamaica, Panama, the Philippines, South Africa, Sweden and the Virgin Islands. Only one letter (0.50 percent), printed in the January 1947 issue, did not include the author's location.

Volume one of *Tan Confessions* (November 1950-October 1951) featured 129 letters to the editor. Like its sister magazine, *Ebony, Tan Confessions* also which had readership all around the world but was largely circulated and read by an urban American audience. Out of the 129 letters to the editor from volume one, 34 letter writers (26.36 percent) were located in the Eastern region of the United States; 33 letter writers (25.58 percent) were located in the Midwestern region of the United States; 12 letter writers (9.30 percent) were located in the Western region of the United States; 44 letter writers (9.30 percent) were located in the Southern region of the United States and 6 letter writers (4.65 percent) were from international locations, such as England, Germany, Korea and the West Indies.

The second volume of *Tan Confessions* (November 1951-October 1952) featured 140 letters to the editor. Twenty-three letter writers (16.43 percent) were located in the Eastern region of the United States; 32 letter writers (22.86 percent) were located in the Midwestern region of the United States; 17 letter writers (12.14 percent) were located in the Western region of the United States; 50 letter writers (37.71 percent) were located in the Southern region of the United States and 18 letter writers (12.86 percent) were from international locations, including the Bahamas, Korea, Newfoundland, Panama, Puerto Rico and the West Indies.

Please find a table below summarizing the letter writer locations for *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* letter writers:

Table 1.
Location of letter writers for *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* magazine

Magazine Title	Volume	East	West	Midwest	South	International
Ebony	1	52	24	41	18	13
Ebony	2	72	21	55	21	31
Tan Confessions	1	34	12	33	44	6
Tan Confessions	2	23	17	32	50	18

Gender of Letter Writers

Volumes one and two of *Ebony* included a total of 350 letters to the editor. Two-hundred of the letters published (57.14 percent) were authored by male readers; 117 letters (33.43 percent) were written by female readers, the gender of the letter writer was unknown for 26 of the letters written (7.43 percent); 6 letters (1.71 percent) were written by both a male and female author and there was one letter (0.29 percent) written by two authors where there was a clearly identified female writer and the gender of the second writer was unknown. The letters published in volumes one and two of *Ebony*, which were primarily authored by male writers, matches the early research of Tarrant (1957) and Vacin (1965), which found that most published letter writers were male.

Combined volumes one and two of *Tan Confessions* included a total of 269 letters to the editor. One-hundred and eighty-seven letters (69.52 percent) were written by

female readers, 66 of the letters (24.54 percent) were authored by male readers and the gender of the letter writer was unknown for 16 of the letters written (5.95 percent).

Common Letter Themes and Trends

When publishing letters in both *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*, the magazine editors published the letters in groups, under titled headings which classified them together according to what the editors may have identified as a common theme. Some examples of these headings created by editors include titles such as: "Covers," "Critical Letters," "Mixed Marriages," "GIs in Germany," "Compliments," "What Men Don't Like," "High School Reader," "Replies to Critics" and "Helpful To Teenagers."

The most common themes the researcher found in *Ebony's* published letters to the editor were: racial image/pride: 97 letters; Military readers: 31 letters; international readers (non-military): 26 letters; shared copies: 25 letters; photographs (*Ebony* was a picture magazine): 24 letters; White readers: 23 letters; *Ebony* magazine covers: 21 letters; editorial content/format/appearance: 21 letters; sexy/risqué topics: 18 letters; Miss Fine Brown Frame Evelyn Sanders: 13 letters; celebrities: 12 letters; the adoption of biracial babies in the UK: 12 letters; the topic of "Black trash": 11 letters; Black publications focusing on race: 7 letters; advertisements: 6 letters; name requests for magazine/ name change requests: 5 letters; and *Ebony* clubs: 2 letters.

Below is a table listing the most common letter themes the researcher found in *Ebony* letters to the editor:

Table 2.
The most common letter themes from *Ebony*

Theme	Number of Letters
Racial image/pride	97
Military readers	31
International readers (nonmilitary)	26
Shared copies	25
Photographs	24
White readers	23
Ebony magazine covers	21
Editorial content/format	21
Sexy/risqué topics	18
Miss Fine Brown Frame Evelyn Sanders	13
Celebrities	12
Adoption of biracial babies in the UK	12
"Black trash"	11
Black publications focusing on race	7
Advertisements	6
Name requests /name change request	5
Ebony clubs	2

The most common letter themes in the *Tan Confessions* letters to the editors that were published include: readers who found the magazine educational/helpful: 75 letters; Home service section of magazine or other non-confession content: 51 letters; shared copies/word of mouth on magazine: 45 letters; teens and teen readers: 44 letters; magazine "for Negroes"/ sharing Negro stories: 40 letters; marriage: 36 letters; military readers: 30 letters; the concept of image/pride: 28 letters; celebrities: 27 letters; romance/confession/women's magazines: 17 letters; White readers: 16 readers; representation of "average Negro vs. Rich Negro": 15 letters; calling content "trash": 12 letters; people who doubted confessions: 11 letters; magazine models: 5 letters; comparing *Tan Confessions* to *Ebony* and *Negro's Digest*: 4 letters; longer stories wanted: 3 letters; and Tan Pal Club: 3 letters. Some of the letters to the editor can be categorized under multiple themes and were listed under multiple theme lists, and some letters did not fall under any of the most common themes and were not listed under any categories. Below is a table listing the most common letter themes the researcher found in *Tan Confessions* letters to the editor:

Table 3.
The most common letter themes from *Tan Confessions*

Theme	Number of Letters
Educational/helpful	75
Home service/non confession content	51
Shared copies/word of mouth	45
Teens and teen readers	44

Table 3: continued

"For Negroes"/ sharing Negro stories	40
Marriage	36
Military	30
The concept of image/pride	28
Celebrities	27
Romance/confessions magazines	17
White Readers	16
"Average Negro vs. rich Negro"	15
"Trash"	12
People who doubted confessions	11
Magazine models	5
Comparing JPC publications	4
Longer stories wanted	3
Tan Pal Club	3

Audience Reaction of Letter Writers

An integral part of this study includes measuring the audience reaction to the content in *Ebony*, *Tan Confessions* and *TAN*, by looking at the letters to the editor that were published. These letters will be analyzed through social comparison theory and provided some insight on how the audience's opinions were represented by magazine editors, who had a hand in selecting, editing and publishing a selection of the letters to

the editor that were received. A five-point scale was created to measure the audience reaction from the letters to the editor in *Ebony*, *Tan Confessions* and *TAN*. As previously discussed, the scale includes the following values: Very Positive, Somewhat Positive, Neutral, Somewhat Negative and Very Negative.

Volume one of *Ebony* (November 1945-October 1946) featured 149 letters to the editor. Out of the 149 letters to the editor published in volume one, 86 letter writers (57.72 percent) had a Very Positive reaction; 22 letter writers (14.77 percent) had a Neutral reaction; 20 letter writers (13.42 percent) had a Somewhat Positive reaction; 11 letter writers (7.38 percent) had a Very Negative reaction and 10 letter writers (6.71 percent) had a Somewhat Negative reaction. Volume two of *Ebony* (November 1946-October 1947) featured 201 letters to the editor. Out of the 201 letters to the editor in volume two, 98 letter writers (48.76 percent) had a Very Positive reaction; 39 letter writers (19.40 percent) had a Neutral reaction; 30 letter writers (14.93 percent) had a Somewhat Positive reaction; 18 letter writers (8.96 percent) had a Somewhat Negative reaction and 16 letter writers (7.96 percent) had a Very Negative reaction.

Below is a table summarizing the letter writer reactions from volumes one and two of *Ebony*:

Table 4.
Reaction from *Ebony* letter writers

Volume Number	Very Positive	Somewhat Positive	Neutral	Somewhat Negative	Very Negative
1	86	20	22	10	11
2	98	30	39	18	16

Volume one of *Tan Confessions* (November 1950-October 1951) featured 129 letters to the editor. Out of the 129 letters to the editor that were published in volume one, 97 letter writers (75.19 percent) had a Very Positive reaction; 20 letter writers (15.50 percent) had a Somewhat Positive reaction; 7 letter writers (5.43 percent) had a Very Negative reaction; 3 letter writers (2.33 percent) had a Somewhat Negative reaction and 2 letter writers (1.55 percent) had a Neutral reaction. Volume two of *Tan Confessions* (November 1951-October 1952) featured 140 letters to the editor. Out of the 140 letters to the editor from volume two, 80 letter writers (57.14 percent) had a Very Positive reaction; 36 letter writers (25.71 percent) had a Somewhat Positive reaction; 13 letter writers (9.29 percent) had a Somewhat Negative reaction; 7 letter writers (5 percent) had a Neutral reaction and 4 letter writers (2.86 percent) had a Very Negative reaction. Below is a table summarizing the letter writer reactions from volume one and two of *Tan Confessions*:

Table 5.
Reaction from *Tan Confessions* letter writers

Volume Number	Very Positive	Somewhat Positive	Neutral	Somewhat Negative	Very Negative
1	97	20	2	3	7
2	80	36	7	13	4

Content Categorization: Magazine Articles

The first volume of *Ebony* (November 1945-October 1946), issues one through twelve, was comprised of approximately 274 articles. The articles can be classified under

the following 22 content categories: Biography/People Profile: 83 articles (30.29 percent); Music/Arts: 42 articles (15.33 percent); Community/Society: 27 articles (9.85 percent); Business: 21 articles (7.66 percent); Race: 17 articles (6.20 percent); Celebrities: 13 articles (4.74 percent); Sports: 12 articles (4.38 percent); Health/Medicine: 10 articles (3.65 percent); Religion: 8 articles (2.92 percent); Beauty/Fashion: 7 articles (2.55 percent); Military: 7 articles (2.55 percent); Education: 6 articles (2.19 percent); Finance/Economy: 3 articles (1.09 percent); History: 3 articles (1.09 percent); Literature: 3 articles (1.09 percent); Food: 2 articles (0.73 percent); Politics: 2 articles (0.73 percent); Culture: 2 articles (0.73 percent); Science/Nature: 2 articles (0.73 percent); Travel: 2 articles (0.73 percent); Family: 1 article (0.36 percent) and Retail/Commerce: 1 article (0.36 percent). Below is a table summarizing the content categories for all articles in volume 1 of *Ebony* magazine:

Table 6.
Volume 1: *Ebony's* Article Categories

Category	Number of Articles
Biography/People Profile	83
Music/Arts	42
Community/Society	27
Business	21
Race	17
Celebrities	13
Sports	12

Table 6: continued

Health/Medicine	10
Religion	8
Beauty/Fashion	7
Military	7
Education	6
Finance/Economy	3
History	3
Literature	3
Food	2
Politics	2
Culture	2
Science/Nature	2
Travel	2
Family	1
Retail/Commerce	1

The second volume of *Ebony* (November 1946-October 1947), issues one through twelve, was comprised of 252 articles. The articles can be classified under the following 20 content categories: Biography/People Profile: 62 articles (24.06 percent); Business: 42 articles (16.67 percent); Community/Society: 32 articles (12.70 percent); Music/Arts: 28 articles (11.11 percent); Food: 10 articles (3.97 percent); Sports: 10 articles (3.97 percent)

Military: 8 articles (3.17 percent); Politics: 7 articles (2.87 percent); Beauty/Fashion: 7 articles (2.78 percent); Education: 7 articles (2.78 percent); Health/Medicine: 6 articles (2.38 percent); Celebrities: 6 articles (2.38 percent); Race: 3 articles (1.19 percent); Travel: 3 articles (1.19 percent); Science/Nature: 3 articles (1.19 percent); Religion: 2 articles (0.79 percent); Culture: 2 articles (0.79 percent); Literature: 2 articles (0.40 percent); Retail/Commerce: 1 article (0.79 percent); and Family: 1 article (0.40 percent).

Below is a table summarizing the content categories for all articles in volume 2 of *Ebony* magazine:

Table 7.
Volume 2: *Ebony's* Article Categories

Category	Number of Articles
Biography/People Profile	62
Business	42
Community/Society	32
Music/Arts	28
Food	10
Sports	10
Military	8
Politics	7
Beauty/Fashion	7
Education	7

Table 7: continued

Health/Medicine	6
Celebrities	6
Race	3
Travel	3
Science/Nature	3
Religion	3
Culture	2
Literature	2
Retail/Commerce	1
Family	1

The first volume of *Tan Confessions* (November 1950-October 1951), issues one through twelve, was comprised of 250 articles. The articles can be classified under the following 11 content categories: Love/Relationships: 86 articles (34.40 percent); Beauty/Fashion: 33 articles (13.20 percent); Celebrities: 30 articles (12 percent); Lifestyle/Home: 30 articles (12 percent); Food: 20 articles (8 percent); Family: 16 articles (6.40 percent); Health/Medicine: 14 articles (5.60 percent); Biography/People Profile: 8 articles (3.20 percent); Music/Arts: 5 articles (2 percent); News/Current Events: 4 articles (1.60 percent) and Retail/Commerce: 4 articles (1.60 percent). Below is a table summarizing the content categories for all articles in volume 1 of *Tan Confessions*:

Table 8.
Volume 1: *Tan Confessions* Article Categories

Category	Number of Articles
Love/Relationships	86
Beauty/Fashion	33
Celebrities	30
Lifestyle/Home	30
Food	20
Family	16
Health/Medicine	14
Biography/People Profile	8
Music/Arts	5
News/Current Events	4
Retail/Commerce	4

The second volume of *Tan Confessions* (November 1951-October 1952), issues one through twelve, was comprised of 183 articles. The articles can be classified under the following 12 content categories: Love/Relationships: 71 articles (38.80 percent); Beauty/Fashion: 21 articles (11.48 percent); Lifestyle/Home: 19 articles (10.38 percent); Celebrities: 18 articles (9.84 percent); Family: 16 articles (8.74 percent); Health/Medicine: 16 articles (8.74 percent); Food: 11 articles (6.01 percent); Biography/People Profile: 5 articles (2.73 percent); Race: 3 articles (1.64 percent);

Community/Society: 1 article (0.55 percent); Finance/Economy: 1 article (0.55 percent) and Music/Arts: 1 article (0.55 percent). Below is a table summarizing the content categories for all articles in volume 2 of *Tan Confessions*:

Table 9.
Volume 2: *Tan Confessions* Article Categories

Category	Number of Articles
Love/Relationships	71
Beauty/Fashion	21
Lifestyle/Home	19
Celebrities	18
Family	16
Health/Medicine	16
Food	11
Biography/People Profile	5
Race	3
Community/Society	1
Finance/Economy	1
Music/Arts	1

The third volume, titled *TAN* (November 1952-October 1953), issues one through twelve, was comprised of 186 articles. The articles can be classified under the following 12 content categories: Love/Relationships: 91 articles (48.92 percent); Lifestyle/Home:

26 articles (13.98 percent); Food: 15 articles (8.06 percent); Beauty/Fashion: 15 articles (8.06 percent); Health/Medicine: 13 articles (6.99 percent); Celebrities: 13 articles (6.99 percent); Family: 8 articles (4.30 percent); Community/Society: 1 article (0.54 percent); Culture: 1 article (0.54 percent); Education: 1 article (0.54 percent); Literature: 1 article (0.54 percent); and Music/Art: 1 article (0.54 percent). Below is a table summarizing the content categories for all articles in *TAN*:

Table 10.
Volume 3: *TAN* Article Categories

Category	Number of Articles
Love/Relationships	91
Lifestyle/Home	26
Food	15
Beauty/Fashion	15
Health/Medicine	13
Celebrities	13
Family	8
Community/Society	1
Culture	1
Education	1
Literature	1
Music/Arts	1

Comparing Tan Confessions Content to TAN's Content

When *Tan Confessions* became *TAN* in October 1953, the magazine continued to print "Stories from True Life," "Special Features," and "Home Service Magazine." Noticeable differences between *Tan Confessions* and *TAN* were that less celebrity stories were published in the "Special Features" section. Out of the 41 special feature articles in volume one of *Tan Confessions* (November 1950-October 1951), 19 were about celebrities, 8 were biographical/people profiles, 11 were about love/relationships and 1 was about news/current events. Out of the 38 special feature articles in volume two of *Tan Confessions* (November 1951-October 1952), 18 were about celebrities, 15 were about love/relationships and 5 were biographical/people profiles. In *TAN* (October 1952-November 1953), there were 31 articles under the "Special Features" category, only 13 were about celebrities. Sixteen of the stories focused on the topics of love/relationships and marriage, and two of the articles were about education and literature. Below is a table comparing the most common types of special features articles in volume 1 of *Tan Confessions*, volume 2 of *Tan Confessions* and *TAN*:

Table 11.
Comparing *Tan Confessions* to *TAN*

Magazine	Special Features Articles	Most Common Articles
Tan Confessions (Vol. 1)	41	Celebrities – 19 articles
Tan Confessions (Vol. 2)	38	Celebrities- 18 articles
TAN	31	Love/Relationships- 16 articles

All of the data from the results/findings section will be interpreted and analyzed in the upcoming Discussion section.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The discussion section will provide a more in-depth assessment and analysis of the data presented in the findings/results section. First, the researcher will look at the most common content categories of all articles from *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* to compare the publications and how this content may have been consumed and viewed by letter writers. Next, the researcher will discuss the following: the demographics of the letter writers from *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*; the most common themes discussed in the letters in *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* and the letter writer's reactions, which was measured by the researcher's five-point scale that ranges from Very Positive to Very Negative. The researcher will then look at some of the letters through the lens of social comparison theory. The letters, which were randomly selected for analysis by the researcher, will be evaluated according to the most common letter themes and will explore how the magazines editors may have presented audience representation and their feedback on the content of *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*.

Social comparison theory explores the belief that individuals, such as those within a media's audience, compare themselves to others to gain accurate self-evaluations of themselves and their "social worlds."[368] The theory concerns the ways that opinions can influence the various processes within a social group. This is connected to a person's desire to relate to others and belong to a group. Social comparison theory is an appropriate theoretical framework for this research because *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* magazines were popular during a time when African Americans were very cognizant of

[368] Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes,"117.

their public image due to racial issues and the mainstream media portrayal of African Americans. Under this theory, it can be assumed that some of the readers may have compared themselves and others in their social groups to the African Americans who were published in *Ebony*, *Tan Confessions* and *TAN*. The readers may have looked to the content and images published in the magazines to accurately reflect what it was like to live as an African American man or woman during the 1940s-1950s. For this reason, the reader sentiment and response to a publication and its content may provide some insight into how some readers viewed the content. Because only a selection of letters to the editor were chosen and published, it is difficult to measure what implications the audience view may have had on the success or failure of a publication.

This discussion section has three main objectives: 1) the researcher will analyze the type of content printed in *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* in order to make a comparison in how the publications were similar and/or different, and how the magazines were represented in the letters to the editor; 2) the researcher will look at the demographics of the letter writers and review the letters to the editor, which have been assigned a value based upon a five-point measurement scale: Very Positive, Somewhat Positive, Neutral, Somewhat Negative and Negative. This section will also explore the most common themes found in the letters to the editor. The letters and most prevalent themes will be evaluated through social comparison theory to explore how these reader opinions, which were pre-selected, edited and published by magazine editors, may reflect the editors presentation of the letter writers' self-evaluation and ability to relate to the content as African Americans, which the magazines largely focused on; and 3) This discussion will

also explore the content in *TAN* and how the published views of the *Tan Confessions* letter writer may have impacted the rebranding of *Tan Confessions* to *TAN* in October 1952.

Of course, the causation for rebranding cannot be determined on the letter writers' reaction, since the letters were pre-selected, edited and published through editorial lenses. However, this research will explore how the editorial framing of audience perception may have had an impact on Johnson Publishing Company's choice to rebrand the magazine, as Johnson was known to be receptive to audience criticism. In the past, he had even cancelled advertising campaigns in *Ebony* magazine after letters to the editor complained about the advertisements affecting the quality of the magazine.

Ebony Content

When Johnson founded *Ebony*, his goal was to publish a photo magazine that would highlight the unseen aspects of Black culture and to celebrate the achievements that were often overlooked by mainstream media. Not only was Johnson inspired by photo magazines like *Life* and *Look*, but also Abbott's *Chicago Defender*. Johnson's editorial approach was most like *Life* and *Look* in format, but it covered African American news. The magazine's content was different from the *Defender*'s, which was proudly militant, sensational, and aggressively challenged racism and injustice. *Ebony* promoted the concept of Black pride through racial uplift, not fighting racism head on. The magazine rarely covered controversial topics, besides interracial relationships, and crafted an editorial approach that was known for "soft and happy" news. In this research, there were 526 articles reviewed from volume one and volume two of *Ebony*. One of the

most noticeable aspects of *Ebony's* content is that the magazine often profiled real people from various walks of life and industries, including prominent public figures such as actress Lena Horne, boxer Joe Louis and U.S. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

Out of the 526 articles reviewed, the top ten content categories, in order from the most to the least number of articles published, are the following: biography/people profiles:145 articles, music/arts:70 articles, business: 63 articles, community/society: 59 articles, sports: 22 articles, race: 20 articles, celebrities: 19 articles, health/medicine: 16 articles, military: 15 articles and beauty/fashion: 14 articles. There were also at least one dozen articles about food and education.

Johnson's pattern of publishing about people who had become the "first, only or best" at an achievement proved to be a successful formula. Stories such as "Beautiful and Brilliant," which profiled Barbara Gonzales, the first African American woman to graduate from Sarah Lawrence College, and "Leg Man," the story of Henry Jeeter, the only African American making artificial limbs during the 1940s, captured audience attention and were often discussed in the letters to the editor. The articles that *Ebony* published about music/arts often centered on musicians, actors and other entertainment topics, such as "Top Hat, Tails to Zoot Suits," an article published in the September 1946 issue, discussing how jazz concerts were played at historic music venues like Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera House.[369] Black businesses were another topic commonly highlighted and articles such as "Biggest Northern Business," published in the August 1946 issue focused on Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, an African

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[369] "Top Hat, Tails to Zoot Suits," *Ebony*, September 1946, 33.

American owned business where Johnson got his start.[370] Articles on the Black community and societal issues such as "Richmond Pioneers Find Hope in Business Boomlet," published in December 1946, talks about the economic success of African Americans living in Richmond, Virginia.[371]

Sports was also a popular topic as many Black athletes were not able to participate in major league sports during this time and if they were able to, they had recently been integrated into the league where they often faced discriminatory practices. For example, "Brown Supermen," an article published in the January 1946 issue of *Ebony* highlighted several athletes, including boxer Henry Armstrong, long jumper Jim Crow and jockey Isaac Murphy.[372]

Although *Ebony* was not known to discuss racial injustice in depth, the topic of race was at times mentioned as the magazine centered on Black life. An example of this is the article titled, "His Majesty Jim Crow," published in April 1946, which discusses discriminatory practices and segregation in South Africa during the apartheid years.[373] Celebrities were reported on in *Ebony* too. "Everybody Who Is Anybody In Harlem Lives On Sugar Hill," published in November 1946, is an article discussing all of the wealthy and famous residents of Sugar Hill in Harlem, New York. This list included boxer Joe Louis and musicians Andy Kirk and Duke Ellington.[374] Topics related to health and medicine were published with the goal to educate. An example is "Africans Pioneered in

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[370] "Biggest Northern Business," *Ebony*, August 1946, 42-44.
[371] "Richmond Pioneers Find Hope Business Boomlet," *Ebony*, December 1946, 5-6.
[372] "Brown Supermen," *Ebony*, January 1946, 6-7.
[373] "His Majesty Jim Crow," *Ebony*, April 1946, 13.
[374] "Everybody Who Is Anybody In Harlem Lives on Sugar Hill," *Ebony*, November 1946, 6-7.

Surgery and Immunization More Than Century Ago," published in February 1947. The two-page article discussed strides African people made in the medical fields of immunization and surgery.[375] Articles about military related topics were published in *Ebony*. "GI Loans," which was published in August 1947, discussed the GI Bill of Rights loan for World War II veterans.[376] Beauty and fashion articles were also published. "Glamour is Global," published in July 1946, focused on beauty trends of African American women in 1946.[377]

The examples above show a range of topics that were published in *Ebony* and exemplify what Johnson set out to do with *Ebony*—show the good side of Black life. Here we see examples of famous, prominent and rich African Americans who live in Harlem; Black people who have made significant contributions to the field of medicine; a showcase of opportunities for military members and a celebration of African American beauty trends. When looking at this content with social comparison theory in mind, it can be assumed that these positive representations could serve as not only inspiration for readers, but also serve as a general representation of African Americans that some may have never encountered before. For those who had not encountered African Americans like the ones featured in the magazine, these images and stories could directly impact their beliefs or even change their perception of African Americans. For example, in some of the letters to the editor that will later be discussed in the Discussion section of this

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[375] "Africans Pioneered in Surgery and Immunization More Than Century Ago," *Ebony*, February 1947, 24-25.
[376] "GI Loans," *Ebony*, August 1947, 22-23.
[377] "Glamour is Global," *Ebony*, July 1946, 18-19.

thesis, there were letter writers who shared how the content in the magazines may influence public perception of African Americans. One of the most common themes in the letters in *Tan Confessions* was the concept of racial image and pride and this directly reflected how the Black readers wanted to see themselves represented well, not only for themselves but for others as well.

Tan Confessions Content

When Johnson founded *Tan Confessions* in 1950, the confessions magazine received mixed reception about the content, and readers were not shy about expressing their views in the first letters to the editor published in December 1950. There were 433 articles reviewed from volume one and volume two of *Tan Confessions*. The magazine, which was comprised of three sections: "Stories from True Life," "Special Features" and the "Home Service Magazine," printed articles on various subjects. However, the dominant and most commonly discussed content was the confessions from the "Stories from True Life" section. Out of the 433 articles reviewed, the top ten content categories, in order from the most to the least number of articles published, are the following: love/relationships: 157, beauty/fashion: 54 articles, lifestyle/home: 49 articles, celebrities: 48 articles, family: 32 articles, food: 31 articles, health/medicine: 30 articles, biography/people profiles: 13 articles, music/arts: 6 articles and both retail/commerce and news/current events had 4 articles published.

The largest number of articles published were in the love/relationship's category and most were confessions. For example, "I Married A Minister," published in February 1951, is the tale of a woman who rejects a relationship with a deacon but gets involved

with his son romantically.[378] Articles about beauty/fashion were published, such as "Color In Your Skin Tones," about foundation and makeup shades that were available for various skin tones, was published in November 1950.[379] The magazines "Home Service Magazine" featured stories on family and child-rearing, lifestyle/home, food, and health/medicine. The following articles are an example of how *Tan Confessions* covered these subjects: "Controlling the Temper Tantrum,"[380] "Pictures Give Lift to Décor,"[381] "Soup's On,"[382] and "Stopping Tooth Decay."[383]

Celebrities, their romantic lives and spouses were another popular topic for articles and columns. Stories such as "How He Proposed"[384] by the wife of track Olympic gold medalist Jesse Owens, was published in January 1952 and "I Gave Up Love For My Career," was published in July 1952, by actress and singer Thelma Carpenter.[385] Like *Ebony*, *Tan Confessions* also profiled some individuals. However, an obvious difference is that *Ebony* profiled business owners and regular people who were not public figures yet had made notable accomplishments in the world. *Tan Confessions* profiled people who were known in some capacity, for example, "Crown Prince of Harlem," published in April 1951, discussed the many experiences of entertainer and nightclub owner Dickie Wells.[386] Out of the articles reviewed, music/arts, retail/commerce and news/current

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[378] "I Married A Minister," *Tan Confessions*, February 1951, 20.
[379] "Color In Your Skin Tones," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950, 39.
[380] "Controlling the Temper Tantrum," *Tan Confessions*, January 1951, 45.
[381] "Pictures Give Lift To Decor," *Tan Confessions*, March 1951, 42.
[382] "Soup's On," *Tan Confessions*, September 1952, 42.
[383] "Stopping Tooth Decay," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950, 45.
[384] "How He Proposed," *Tan Confessions*, January 1952, 7.
[385] "I Gave Up Love For My Career," *Tan Confessions*, July 1952, 22.
[386] "Crown Prince of Harlem," *Tan Confessions*, April 1951, 18.

events were also in the top ten subject categories. Examples of these stories include: "Stage Struck," published in April 1951,[387] "This Month's Best Buys in New Products," published in November 1950[388] and "Harlem Gang Girl," published in July 1951.[389]

Similarities and Differences between *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* Content

Although *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* were cross advertised as sister publications, there were noticeable differences in the content. First, the most common content category in *Tan Confessions* was love/relationships and there were 157 articles on this topic in volume one and two of the magazine, which primarily included confessions, of course. In contrast, *Ebony* only featured two articles on love/relationships in two volumes. The most common content category in *Ebony* was biography/people profiles and there were 145 articles under this category. *Tan Confessions* featured 13 biography/people profiles. One of the most obvious differences between the two publications is that *Ebony* was culture and news oriented and appealed to a wide audience. *Tan Confessions* was known as a confessions, entertainment or women's magazine. Although *Tan Confessions* had a "Home Service Magazine" section, the dominant draw to the publication were the confessions. *Ebony* featured topics relative to everyday life and told the triumphant stories of prominent, accomplished and history-making moments, people and causes. *Ebony* articles that focused on people were not necessarily all about well-known people or celebrities, but movers, shakers and those who stood out in society whether they were

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[387] "Stage Struck," *Tan Confessions*, April 1951, 28.
[388] "This Month's Best Buys In New Products," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950, 44.
[389] "Harlem Gang Girl," *Tan Confessions*, July 1951, 18.

in education, arts/music, politics, business, or the military. The articles in *Tan Confessions* that focus on people focused on love/relationships or celebrities.

For some readers who were familiar with JPC's previous publications, these confessions may have represented a stark contrast in comparison to the social, political, and culture driven stories that appeared in the *Negro's Digest* and *Ebony*. This is something that writers of the letters to the editor addressed and will be further explored in this section. Confessions, which were billed as true stories, written with immense detail including dialogue, were viewed as oversharing, private and in some cases shameful moments, because these were the kind of things that many would not think of sharing through a public platform, such as a magazine. *Negro Digest*, *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* were popular during a time when African Americans were very cognizant of their public image because of racial issues in America and how African Americans had historically been portrayed in mainstream media outlets. *Ebony*'s content, which was published with the goal of providing racial uplift and celebrating achievements was something that provided positive representation. *Tan Confessions*, which featured confessions that were often about sex, bad relationships and sometimes betrayal, crime were real topics, that some related to, but they also represented the negative stereotypes that were often associated with African Americans.

Letters to the Editor and Social Comparison Theory

In this section, the researcher will explore the demographics of the letter writers of *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*; analyze the letter writer reactions, which were determined by a five-point scale ranging from Very Negative to Very Positive; discuss the most

common themes in the letters and assess these themes through social comparison theory to explore how the letters published demonstrate the letter writers' self-evaluation as presented by the publication editors after their process of selecting, editing and categorizing the letters.

Letter Writer Demographics

This section will briefly outline observations about the gender, age, professional status and military status of the letters published in both *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* magazines.

Out of the 350 letters to the editor published in *Ebony*: 200 of the letters were authored by males, 117 were written by females and 6 of the letters featured both one male and one female writer. This observation by the researcher was based off an assumption due to traditional male and female names and the content in the letter, which sometimes provided information regarding the letter writer's gender. In some instances the writer clearly identified if they were male or female. Out of the 269 letters to the editor published in *Tan Confessions*: 187 were women and 66 of the letter writers were men. These figures may not provide accurate insight about the audience of each publication because editors selected which letters to publish in each monthly issue. It is possible that letters were selected based on the publishing company's set of criteria, although the researcher could not find any material outlining guidelines for letter to the editor submissions. Both *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* generally printed anywhere between 6 to 24 letters in each issue, meaning that a large number of letters received were never published.

In the magazine's first issue, Johnson specifically stated in his Letter From the Editor that "…It is the hope of *Tan Confessions* to publish each month the most interesting of these true-to-life stories, to tell the bewildering problems of men and women in love and how they were able to achieve happiness. . ."[390] Despite this declaration, the letters to the editor that were published in *Tan Confessions* often referred to the publication as a women's magazine. The categorization of confessions magazines as "women's magazines," dates back to early views on confessions magazines, which were generally found to be read by with teenage girls or housewives.[391] In a letter titled "Fights For Copy," published in December 1950, Harry Williams stated:

> Your first issue of *TAN CONFESSIONS* was a wow! I know magazines like yours are supposed to be for women, but let me say right now that I don't intend missing a single copy of your publication. I had to fight to get a look at my sister's copy, but next month I'm going to get to the newsstand before they sell out again. Good luck to you.[392]

Although the magazine was intended for both a male and female audience, the content primarily focused on love/relationships, beauty/fashion and home/lifestyle topics, which have traditionally been associated with a female audience. *Ebony,* on the other hand, was more of a general news magazine that appealed to people regardless of gender because it published stories about prominent individuals, places and events. At times, *Ebony's* letter writers included their professional titles or even the name of the association, company or organization. For example, there were letters published from people who identified themselves as actresses, assistant directors, authors, directors,

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[390] Johnson, "Letter from the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, November 1950, 3.
[391] Randall, "Confession magazines," 45 and 47.
[392] Harry Williams, "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, December 1950.

chiefs, editors, presidents, secretaries and writers. This is opposite of what was published in *Tan Confessions*, which did not often provide professional titles for letter writers unless they were in the military. However this could be due to a number of reasons: 1)There is no way to determine if all of the letter writers who submitted to the publication shared their job title; 2) Due to the letters being selected and edited prior to publication, there is a possibility that the editors made the decision not to include the job titles of the letter writers; and 3) It is possible that the letter submission criteria, which the researcher found no mention of, did not require or discouraged writers from providing this information.

In *Ebony*, there were letters printed from people in religious organizations, such as African Churches Mission, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Inc., National Catholic Community Service and The National Catholic Monthly. There were letter writers associated with various companies and organizations including: American Fellowship Organization, Camp Fire Girls, Inc., Professional Workers of America, American Red Cross, Central Community House, National Urban League, the Negro American League, Standard Oil Company, St. Andrews Hospital, Chicago Negro Art Theatre, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, and West Baden College. There were letter writers who were affiliated with other media and publications such as *Popular Photography*, *the Los Angeles Sentinel*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *The Crisis*, *The Philadelphia Independent*, Cooperative News Service and *Common Ground*.

Finally, there were letters written by governmental workers and military members from the Long Beach Municipal Court, War Department in Washington D.C., the

Mayor's Committee on Race Relations in Chicago, the U.S. Army Air Corps and the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve, and Tuskegee Airfield. In *Tan Confessions*, the letter writers rarely provided this kind of information. In fact, only four letter writers identified themselves as having an affiliation with a professional organization: Florida A&M College, Dorothy Farrier School of Charm and Modeling and the Army Post Office (APO). An example of one such letter was written by Thomas H. Wright, executive director of the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations in Chicago. Published in the December 1945 issue, the letter said: "I should like to congratulate you on your first issue of *EBONY*. It is a striking presentation of fine merit and constructive point of view."[393] It is possible that the editors' inclusion of professional titles, religious organizations and governmental affiliations for *Ebony*'s letter writers was aligned with the magazine's goal to present itself as a vehicle for promoting achievement, progress and upward mobility in the Black community.

Ebony appeared to appeal to an older, professional and more diverse audience unlike *Tan Confessions*, which often attracted teenaged readers. There were very few mentions of teenagers in any of the letters to the editor published in *Ebony*. *Tan Confessions* was commonly read by teenaged readers and even featured a column called "Teen Talk." Out of the 269 letters published in volume one and two of the magazine, 66 of the letter writers referenced teenagers or identified themselves as teenagers. An example is a letter published in the April 1951 issue, the teenaged author, Margaret Riley, wrote:

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[393] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, December 1945.

> I, too, am a teen-ager and I find *TAN CONFESSIONS* very educational as well as interesting. As I was reading some of the letters sent to you in the February issue, I came across one about "filth" allowed to contaminate the newsstand. I feel that anyone who thinks it is filth should not read it, and they won't have anything to complain about. Also, I don't think that any sensible person would let anything like a book turn them into a delinquent. As long as there are people like my classmates and your other faithful readers and myself who are willing to buy your books, just continue to publish them.[394]

Mae Lee Jackson, whose letter was published in the May 1951 issue, described how both she and her teenaged sons read the magazine and thought teenagers could learn from the it, despite claims from others that they could negatively be influenced:

> My two teen-age boys and I read *TAN CONFESSIONS* each and every month that it comes out on the newsstands. Don't listen to what some people say about the magazine being disgraceful to our teen-agers. You know that a magazine cannot disgrace our teen-agers because long before it was published, many teenagers were disgracing themselves. Perhaps if this book had been on sale and they had read it and gotten some meaning out of it, I expect some of them would have been better off today.[395]

Both magazines were read by members of the military. In volume one and two of *Ebony*, 28 of the letter writers identified themselves as being in the military and 31 letters referenced the military and military readers. In volume one and two of *Tan Confessions*, there were 24 letters written by military members and 30 letters mentioned the military and military readers. Military members often cited *Ebony* in a favorable way, such as in the letter published in the January 1946 issue, written by Frank S. Dickens, a member of Ward B-2 of Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver, Colorado. He wrote in a letter titled "More Compliments:"

> Thanks, 114 other G.I.'s here also send their thanks. We are proud of such a fine, decent and clean magazine—that's the kind of stuff that we have fought and are still

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[394] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, May 1951.
[395] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, March 1951.

> suffering for. We have USO shows, movies, speakers and all kinds of entertainment here in the ward, but your December issue of EBONY has brought more cheer than anything yet. There were shouts and cheers and many comments such as: "That is the kind of magazine that I can be proud of," "They were on the beam while we were fighting" and many other expressions…Thanks again and we hope to show our appreciation by getting a 100 percent subscription from this ward. Please keep it going and keep it free of the "86 year old war," the 150 other publications will take care of that battle.[396]

In this letter, Dickens thanks *Ebony* for being a quality publication and said, "that's the kind of stuff that we have fought and are still fighting for." From the perspective of social comparison theory, here we see how Black military men identify positive representation of themselves as African Americans, which Black people have historically fought for, through the content in *Ebony*, and they define this representation as "fine, decent and good." Sharing a letter with this kind of commentary may have suited the editorial goals of Johnson Publishing Company and *Ebony*, which seems to include presenting the magazine as a beacon of uplift, and positive representation from African Americans from all walks of life, including military members.

Military members who read *Tan Confessions*, often expressed liking the magazine as well, such as in a letter titled "GIs Like Tan," published in the December 1951 issue. Corporals Charles R. Johnson and Edward Johnson, who were stationed in Korea, said:

> Just a few lines from my buddies and myself, expressing how much we enjoyed your issue of *TAN CONFESSIONS* for September. In fact, we have enjoyed all those we have seen so far. In your September issue, we enjoyed most of all "Con Man," and "My Japanese Romance." It seems that there are quite a few of the fellows in our outfit who picked these as stories of the month.[397]

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[396] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, January 1946.
[397] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, December 1951.

As previously detailed, *Tan Confessions* printed more letters from female and teen readers and *Ebony* printed more letters from male readers and letter writers who shared their professional titles and affiliations. Both magazines had readers from the military, who were generally fond of the publications and appreciated them both for entertainment or representation. The publishing of audience feedback of this nature not only serves as a representation of how the editors viewed what their reading audience cared about, but it could also directly impact the public perception of both magazines and their value to African American communities. The reading audience may be directly impacted when considering social comparison theory and the tendency to self-evaluate by comparing to others who are deemed to be in the same social group, gender, age group, race or even professional standing. If the readers believed that letter writers thought the content reflected negatively of African Americans as a group, which they related to, then it is arguable that they may have also believed it negatively impacted their own image.

Letter Ratings

This section will provide an overview of the reactions of found in the letters to the editor that were selected for publication in *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions.* This analysis will detail where the letters fall on the five-point measurement scale created by the researcher with the following values: Very Positive, Somewhat Positive, Neutral, Somewhat Negative and Negative. Letters to the editor published in volume one and two of *Ebony* provided feedback that was overwhelmingly positive. Out of the 350 letters reviewed, 184 were classified as Very Positive, 50 were Somewhat Positive, 61 were Neutral, 28 were Somewhat Negative and 27 were Very Negative. The letters printed in volume one

and two of *Tan Confessions* were also mostly positive. Out of the 269 letters reviewed, 177 were classified as Very Positive, 56 were Somewhat Positive, 9 were Neutral, 16 were Somewhat Negative and 11 were Very Negative. Below is a table summarizing the findings:

Table 12.
Letter writer reactions from *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*

Magazine Title	Very Positive	Somewhat Positive	Neutral	Somewhat Negative	Very Negative
Ebony	184	50	61	28	27
Tan Confessions	177	56	9	16	11

These results show that despite *Ebony* publishing more letters to the editor overall, both magazines printed more positive letters than negative. This demonstrates how the magazine's editors aimed to show more positive audience feedback when selecting letters to print in each issue. Out of the 350 *Ebony* letters reviewed, sixty-seven percent were positive, and fifty-five percent were negative. Out of the 269 letters reviewed from *Tan Confessions*, eighty-seven percent were positive, and ten percent were negative. *Ebony* received more criticism than *Tan Confessions*, despite it being known as a magazine that reported "soft, happy news."

It is important to consider social comparison theory when analyzing the positive and negative letters because if individuals truly strive to evaluate self by comparing themselves to others who they deem as a part of their social group or someone of similar standing, then it is possible that the letter writers who's letters were chosen for

publication compared their own opinions and values to those represented by the content in the magazine. If a person relates to a group, they will compare their own abilities and values with those in that group. When making a comparison, they will look for similarities and seek accurate self-assessments within the social group, or in this case the African Americans represented in *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*. All letter writer opinions are formed through the method of comparative appraisal because they are observations made without any face-to-face interaction. The opinions about the magazine, its content and the individuals published in the magazine are formed through observing the magazine, its content and the individuals in the publication as a reference point.

The letters that were selected to be published offered criticism and praise and were authored by different genders, age groups, professional and educational backgrounds and locations. This represents the journalistic tenet of representing balance views and for this reason, it is not surprising that the magazine editors selected both positive and negative letters to print. The varied opinions in the letters published represents an attempt at an unbiased representation of audience feedback. However, unless all of the letters received were printed it is still hard to determine whether the publications received less or more positive and/or negative feedback in the letters to the editor. One thing that many of the published letters had in common is that they were written by African Americans with a shared a cultural identity but individual beliefs about how African Americans should be represented.

The letters that will be reviewed in the upcoming section will explore how the letter writers' commonalities as a part of the same racial and cultural background may

have led them to self-assess and compare their own ideas about representations and personal values to those represented in *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*. Although it is acknowledged that the letters chosen for publication are representative of the editor's perception of reader feedback, the content of the letters will be analyzed through the lenses of social comparison theory.

The Most Common Letter Themes: Ebony

This section will look at the most common letter themes found in the letters selected for publication by the magazine's editor, using examples that can be classified as across the reaction scale as Very Positive, Somewhat Positive, Neutral, Somewhat Negative and Negative. Again, these examples will be analyzed under the scope of social comparison theory. Here are six of the most common themes that were addressed by letters published in *Ebony*, in order from the most to least common: racial image/pride: 97 letters; shared copies: 25 letters; *Ebony* magazine covers: 21 letters; editorial content/format/appearance: 21 letters; sexy/risqué topics: 18 letters; the topic of "Black trash": 11 letters. Here the research will look at these themes and social comparison theory to determine how the letter writers expressed their self-assessment based on the topics discussed in the letters.

The concept of racial image/pride was the most common theme in *Ebony* letters published. *Ebony* was not known to address racial issues or promote militant ideologies; however, it can be assumed that given the magazine's purpose, the discussion of racial image/pride was to be expected within the magazine's content and amongst its readers. The magazine was founded with the goal to share positive news and stories of

achievement within African American communities, which was often overlooked by mainstream magazines during the time. Looking at this topic through social comparative theory, the prevalence of this theme in the published letters suggests that it's likely that the readers and letter writers looked to *Ebony*, a Black magazine, not only as a source of representation for African Americans but that their portrayal reflected how they would be perceived by other people as well. What follows are three examples of letters discussing racial image/pride. The first letter below, written by Henry Preston from Paris, France, and published in the December 1945 issue of *Ebony*, received a Very Positive rating as it did not critique the publication in any way. In a letter titled "Compliments," the writer says:

> It is a source of profound pleasure to learn that a Negro magazine such as *Ebony* has been presented to the world. I'm sincerely proud because it portrays the Negro as an intelligent personality. He has faith in the destiny of his country. He has showed his willingness to die for the principles of democracy.[398]

In the second letter, also titled "Compliments," which was written by Hazel Slaughter from New York City and published in the same issue, she also talks about how the magazine represents the image of Black people. The letter was rated Somewhat Positive:

> I think I may safely say, that among my friends there is scarcely one, who has ever had any contact with an educated Negro. Your magazine could be able to help bridge this gap and I wish you success and I hope it will.[399]

The third letter, written by Henry E. Luckie from Cleveland, Ohio, and published in the April 1947 issue of *Ebony*, received a Neutral rating. The letter, titled "Critical

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[398] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, December 1945.
[399] Ibid.

Letters" mentioned letters to the editor that condemned *Ebony*, however he did not really assess the publication or the content himself. He wrote:

> The letters of condemnation in your January issue of *EBONY* prove how well we, the colored people, have accepted the Jim Crow pattern and made it a part of our lives. When we find people who are willing to break through it, we refuse to let them live their own lives, but hold them to the pattern and condemn them severely for leaving it.[400]

In the first letter, Preston identifies the magazine as a "Negro magazine" and expresses pride in the way that Black people are being portrayed with intelligence. Social comparison theory outlines how an individual looks for accurate self-representations within their social groups when defining themselves. This representation enables an individual to self-assess and compare their opinions, values and representations to those with whom they identify. In this case, it would be African American people. Because Preston found the portrayal favorable, he felt a sense of pride with the way African Americans were being represented. Slaughter expresses feeling that this magazine represents the image of an "educated Black person" and describes how this portrayal can show other people what an educated Black person looks like. Historically, the mainstream representation of African Americans has not always been positive. As previously discussed during the overview of the history of the African American press, many of those early publications were started to advocate against racial injustice and combat negative views and representations of African Americans. Slaughter's letter emphasizes how she hopes that the publication will expose others to what's considered a

[400] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, April 1947.

positive representation and expose those who had never met an educated Black person to an image that would broaden their perspectives.

Luckie shares how he feels *Ebony* is being unfairly critiqued and describes how the impact of Jim Crow laws and the beliefs that stemmed from them limited how some African Americans viewed themselves. Those who act outside of those strict confines are unfairly condemned. Through social comparison theory, we can see how those who did critique the magazine and its content wanted to see a certain image of African Americans portrayed. When they found that the actual content did not match their self-evaluations or how they defined themselves, they criticized *Ebony* because from their perspective it did not accurately represent African Americans, which is the group they related to. Social comparison theory explains that the more an individual identifies with the individual they are comparing themselves to, the more they look for similarities in abilities and opinions.

Another common theme within *Ebony*'s letter to the editors was the concept of sharing copies of *Ebony* or spreading the word about the publication. It can be assumed that the editors may have published a high volume of letters that shared this practice to inform and encourage other readers on how they too could spread the word about *Ebony*. Under this theme, two letters will be discussed. The first letter, written by John Razaf and published in the May 1946 issue, was titled "*Ebony* Gets Around." This letter received a Very Positive rating because Razaf discussed his enthusiasm for sharing the publication with others. He wrote:

> Since my chief hobby is circulating worthy and educational Negro publications among white people with whom I come into contact, you can imagine the pride and joy I feel when their eyes behold the pages of *EBONY*. To date I have bought and circulated over one hundred copies, from your first edition to that of the

> present March issue. As a force for changing the false opinions that most whites have of us, through the lack of facts and miseducation concerning the Negro, your magazine tops all others. *EBONY*, with its breathtaking accounts of Negro achievements, good taste in pictures, up-to-the-minute editing and dignity, works wonders on the most biased and under-nourished mind. I hope many of your lucky readers will adopt my hobby. We know "our side" of the story but we must make the other fellow know it. There is no better way than leaving a few copies of *EBONY* around, accidentally—on purpose![401]

The second letter titled "Japan Reader" by Edward Lundin, a military reader stationed in Japan, was published in September 1946. The letter received a rating of Very Positive. Lundin wrote:

> This is to let you know that *EBONY* travels to the far corners of the world. My wife picks up a couple of copies at the newsstand every month and mails one to me. After I've read it, I pass it around to the other fellows and when they have read it, I post items and pictures from it on our Information and Education board so the boys can see what a swell job is being done on the home front. The information we receive from *EBONY* is priceless. I've noticed several white officers, including the battalion commanding officer, looking at the pictures and reading the articles with great interest. So here's three cheers for *EBONY* and may the message it is sending be everlasting.[402]

In the first letter, Razaf shared how he often shares "worthy and educational Negro publications," with White people. He felt great pride in the contents of *Ebony* and had purchased and shared hundreds of copies of nearly every issue. Razaf's concern was that there was a "lack of facts" about African Americans and that *Ebony* would be able to change any negative opinions. He found that *Ebony's* layout and content offered accurate representations. Looking at this information through social comparison theory, it can be assumed that *Ebony's* representation of African Americans was so relatable to Razaf and that he saw so much of himself and how he wanted the group to be portrayed in the

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[401] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, May 1946.
[402] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, September 1946.

content, that he was driven to share the magazine with others and hopefully change the minds of those who held negative beliefs about the racial group.

In the second letter, Lundin says how he shares the magazine with his fellow military members and posted the items on an Information and Education board. Lundin thought it was important to mention that even White officers and the battalion commander had taken interest in *Ebony*. He did not mention why this was worth pointing out, but it can be assumed that he felt it was imperative for them to be educated about African Americans and that this may have an impact on the perception of himself, but also the other Black military members.

Ebony's covers were also a common theme for letter writers. John Johnson was known to be very sensitive to audience feedback and even had a reputation for dropping advertisements if readers complained about them. It is possible that editors chose to publish letters providing feedback about the magazine cover in order to attempt to provide a well-rounded perspective on how some readers viewed the cover. The magazine cover featured photographs that attracted both positive and negative feedback in the letters to the editor. One of the letters that will be analyzed in this section, titled "Too Much Like Life," is an example of how they may have been open to presenting not only compliments but criticism as well, especially because being compared as a direct copy of another magazine's work may not necessarily be considered positive or respectable. Although *Ebony* had always made it clear that they were very inspired by *Life*, some may view the imitation as a form of plagiarism or a lack of originality. On the

other end, the editors may have viewed being compared to a prestigious magazine like *Life* as a compliment.

Here two letters to the editor with both a Very Negative and Somewhat Negative reaction will be reviewed. The first letter titled "Covers" was written by Major D. Lucas from Holly Springs, Mississippi, and published in the May 1947 issue of *Ebony*. Lucas wrote: "I have just finished reading your March *EBONY* and I think it was absolutely prideless of you to put Mabel Lee on the cover of *EBONY* almost naked."[403] The second letter written by Holmes Morgan from New York is titled "Wants Black Beauties," and was published in the August 1946 issue. Morgan wrote:

> How about the picture of a BLACK beauty on the cover of your *EBONY*? So many Negroes have inferiority complexes and frustrations because they cannot approach the accepted standard of beauty (white). It would be a noble service indeed if you took it upon yourself to give out with a bit of pro-black propaganda, for we have had so much anti-black propaganda that it's a great wonder that we all aren't mentally defeated! Pro-black propaganda is a monumental job, and I believe your magazines could "start-the-ball-a-rolling."[404]

In the first letter, Lucas expresses disdain with the cover because Mabel Lee was dressed in a way that he felt was "nearly naked." On the cover, the tap dancer posed wearing a black, two-piece costume which showed off her midsection. The sheer bra-like top had fringe around the shoulders and flower-like pasties. The bottoms featured a strap around her midsection and a small fringe skirt. She wore a pearl necklace and black fishnet stockings. It is clear from Lucas' brief, straight-to-the-point letter that he felt that the cover photo was inappropriate and too provocative. He described the use of the cover

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[403] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, May 1947.
[404] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, August 1946.

photo as "prideless" which indicates that he felt it was a negative representation of a Black woman on the cover of the magazine. Through social comparison theory, we know that the more an individual identifies with the individual they are comparing themselves to, the more they look for similarities in opinions. It is arguable, then, that Lucas' ideals about Black representation were not adequately portrayed by the magazine's covers. Therefore, he was driven to share this in his letter to the editor in order to attempt to gain better representation on future covers.

In the second letter, Morgan also sought what he felt was appropriate representation by requesting that *Ebony* published covers that celebrated the beauty of Black women. He expressed that he felt sharing "pro- Black propaganda" should be a focus of the magazine and acknowledged that it was a major task but that JPC's magazines should try. Through social comparison theory, we see how Morgan felt that the cover models were not representative of his idea of Black beauty and because *Ebony*, the Black publication which he is comparing his ideals and values to, is representing something other than what he defines as Black beauty, he is seeking adequate representation through his letter.

Almost two dozen letters to the editor discussed the editorial content, format and appearance of *Ebony*. Two letters to the editor that have varying opinions will be reviewed. The first letter, titled "Compliments," was written by Dick Mooney from Steve Hannagan Publicity in New York City. The letter, which was published in March 1946 received a Very Positive rating. In the letter, Mooney wrote:

> With all sincerity, I believe that you have a magazine of which you may be justly proud both from the makeup art and editorial point of view. It is definitely a class

> magazine and should rate with the top pictorial monthlies of the nation. It is a courageous effort and I shall be watching your progress with more than casual interest.[405]

The second letter, titled "Too Much Like Life," was written by Dr. R.B. Phillips from Bowling Green, Virginia, and was published in March 1946. The letter received a Somewhat Positive rating and said:

> Enjoyed your November issue of *EBONY*. My first impressions follow:
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> 1. The format is too much like *Life*, and could be more original.
> 2. The photography is excellent.
> 3. The choice of material shows evidence of your usual good editorial judgement and sense of news value. I was extremely glad to see that you did not play the old worn-out harp of discrimination. I wish that Negro editors in general would realize that their public no longer realize that their public no longer wants to hear about something which they know exists, and which each individual is doing his best to fight in his own way. Your magazine could be spoken of as a "Pictorial of Negro Life and Accomplishment." It is a positive approach to the solution of our problems as a minority. I also found *EBONY* full on interesting facts and entertaining oddities. Your pictorial article on Hazel Scott was very good, and especially your failure to mention the D.A.R. incident.[406]

In the first letter, Mooney describes how the magazine is something that the editors can be proud of and references the art and editorial layout as highpoints. He then compares the quality to other picture magazines of the time and calls it a "courageous effort." *Ebony* was published to highlight the news and achievements of African Americans. In analyzing Mooney's letter through social comparison theory, it can be said that he found the publication to not only be a positive representation that he related to but also felt that the publication was so well put together that it was comparable to popular

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[405] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, March1946.
[406] Ibid.

mainstream publications. *Ebony*'s goal was to highlight the often-ignored news and aspects of African Americans. Dr. Phillips praised the magazine for not focusing on discrimination but highlighting African American accomplishments instead. As a doctor, it can be assumed that he identified with the accomplished people that he saw represented in *Ebony* because he expressed feeling that *Ebony* could be described as a "pictorial of Negro life and accomplishments" and that the magazine could be a "solution" to? minority problems. Such problems Phillips wished to see resolved may be to show positive representation of African American life and to not allow discrimination and other aspects of racial injustice to discourage individuals from taking risks to achieve their goals. Although Phillips complained that the magazine format was too much like *Life* and could be more original, overall the magazine was praised as a positive.

Some readers of *Ebony* found the topics and images published to be too sexy or risqué and this was often addressed in letters to the editor. During a time when sexual topics were somewhat taboo in mainstream media, some readers may have felt this was a critique that would improve the magazine's quality and make it more acceptable. The editor's may have decided to publish these letters to encourage other potential letter writers to give their input. Here three examples of letters that touch on this topic will be analyzed. The three letters received the reactions of Somewhat Negative, Somewhat Positive and Very Positive. The first letter, titled "Complaints" was written by Muriel Donnelly from New York City. The letter, which was published in the magazine's second issue in December 1945, expressed that although she thought the magazine was excellent, she did not like the use of "dirty jokes:"

> I have just seen Vol. 1, No. 1 of *EBONY*. May I congratulate you on the excellence of the magazine. I have only one criticism—cut out the dirty jokes. They belittle the dignity of the entire magazine. Also, why not be a little more careful of the low cut dresses on your women. It is one phase of the white woman's fashion that the colored woman might well eliminate.[407]

The second letter, written by Ada P. McCormick, an editor from Tucson, Arizona, the letter "Risque Pictures" was published in the April 1947 issue. The author wrote:

> I want to congratulate you on an issue I saw recently without a single item that would be offensive in a family magazine. The risqué pictures may increase a magazine's circulation in a certain direction but it frightens off the quality of readership that has the character and the moral gumption to work to give Negroes a fair break.[408]

The final letter to be discussed here was written by Lillian Dowell from Chicago, Illinois, and published in the August 1947 issue. The letter was titled "Covers" and the author wrote the following:

> *EBONY* has been almost a personal undertaking with me ever since I started my subscription with Vol. I, No. 1. Most of the articles I've found entertaining, educational and stimulating. But I'd long been annoyed by the flagrant appeal to the sex-obsessed (about one article carefully planted in each issue, I'd say). It really struck home when I picked up the March issue and saw that this issue, the first my younger brother would receive on a gift subscription I had just entered for him would just help build up the impression many people have of Negroes are morally inferior.[409]

In the first letter, Donnelly thought the magazine was excellent but shared that she did not like seeing dirty jokes because they "belittle the dignity of the magazine." She also did not like to see women wearing low-cut dresses and thought it was a "White women's fashion" that Black women should not wear. Here, like many other letter writers, Donnelly had her own ideas about the dignity of a Black publication and what

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[407] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, December 1945.
[408] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, April 1947.
[409] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, August 1947.

kind of content is acceptable and what is not. The letter expresses concern about the portrayal of Black women wearing low-cut dresses. In line with social comparison theory, here we see how Donnelly wishes to relate to the images of other African Americans and expresses these ideals through her letter, which encourages the magazine to adopt what she considers acceptable.

In the second letter McCormick congratulated the editors for printing material that was family-friendly and shared how "risqué pictures" changes the quality of the audience. She says that readers who have the "character and moral gumption to work to give Negroes a fair break" would not be amongst the audience. Here she alludes that the magazine's quality and the attracted audience could have an impact on how African Americans are treated. This letter shows that McCormick wants to see content that portrays African Americans in a way that would cause others to view them worthy of giving a break or fair treatment. This represents the desire to see an accurate self-evaluation through the media, with hopes that it could end racial injustice and discriminatory practices. The final letter by Dowell describes how although she enjoyed the magazine, she felt that some of the content appealed to those who were "sex obsessed." She was concerned that her younger brother would be exposed to this kind of content and felt that these kinds of articles supported the views of those who believed African Americans were inferior. Dowell's letter, like the others under the category of sexy/risqué content, supports the idea that an individual, a part of a social group, desires to see accurate self-evaluations through the magazine's content.

The final theme is the topic of "Black trash." The first letter below, written by Kathleen Daveson from Los Angeles, California, was published in the May 1946 issue and titled "Black Trash." The letter was so hotly debated by readers that ten letters were published in response to Daveson's letter from June to December 1946. It can be assumed that editors may have received a high volume of letters about the original letter or they may have even felt it was a hotly debated, worthy discussion topic if they continued to publish responses to the letter over a six month timespan.

In the original letter, which received a Somewhat Negative rating, Daveson wrote:

> Your magazine is nice but for God's sake, lay off this mess about Negroes living in the ghetto and the horrible conditions that the Negro lives under. We know you mean well, but you might as well get it through your head that if the kind of Negro who lives in a rat-infested kitchenette didn't like to live like a pig in a sty, he would not. You cannot help a person that is too lazy to help himself. They are nothing but poor black trash and we cannot help them anymore than the white people can help poor white trash. Many Negroes will go into a night club and throw away fifty or sixty dollars in a night and won't even save out enough to pay their room rent or buy food. They are happy to live like that, so who can help them? Eight years ago, I was receiving $8 a month from the county along with thousands of other people and now I am worth $20,000. I have a $10,000 home and $2000 worth of furniture and a $1600 car. I'm almost deaf and have been ill for years. Some of my friends are worth twice that much. No one helped us. So why worry about our poor trash.[410]

In response to Daveson, Willard Howard of Chicago, Illinois, wrote the following letter, which was published in August 1946 and rated as Neutral because the author did not comment on the publication but in response to Daveson's opinion. The letter titled "'Black Trash' Replies" said:

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[410] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, May 1946.

> I wish to express an opposing opinion to a letter written by Kathleen Daveson which appeared in May issue of *EBONY* under the topic Black Trash. Kathleen should realize people don't live in ghettos because they like it but because of overcrowded conditions and restrictive covenants. In publishing pictures of poor housing conditions no one appealed to Kathleen Daveson for help. You simply showed the need for more and better housing. It is a safe bet that Kathleen made the wealth she crows about off this same Black Trash she now scorns. If Kathleen is such a genius and financial wizard, why did she have to take relief from the county in the first place. Someone helped her, but no one is asking for her help. Kathleen Daveson is a case for a psychiatrist. Sane people don't crow about their wealth.[411]

In the first letter, Daveson said that the magazine was "nice" however she was very unhappy with the magazine discussing the unfortunate conditions of African Americans in ghettos. She insists that they live under those circumstances because of irresponsible financial decisions and because they want to live that way. She shares how despite her medical issues, she was able to accumulate a net worth, buy a home and a car. She says *Ebony* should not be worried about poor Black people and that they cannot be helped, just as White people cannot help poor White people. This letter relates to the aspect of social comparison theory where an individual, Daveson in this case, compares themselves to others, the poor African Americans represented in the magazine, and if they perceive that their opinions and skills are similar, they are likely to relate. In this case, Daveson believes because she was able to escape poverty that she does not relate to the poor African Americans published in *Ebony*. Instead, she is encouraging the editors to avoid publishing this kind of content and is comparing herself to the people that she feels are different from her.

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[411] "Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, August 1946.

In the response letter from Howard, he shared a contrasting view. He said that Ebony was just shining a light on a very real issue, housing disparity for the poor. He seemed to sympathize with the poor stating that no one would willingly choose to live in poor conditions and questioned the reasoning behind Daveson's letter and how she was able to change her financial situation. This letter represents the desire for *Ebony* to show African Americans from various walks of life and socioeconomic backgrounds. Although Daveson's life changes made her no longer able to identify with the poor represented in the articles, Howard shared how this representation was necessary. Although some of the letters written in response to Daveson shared that they agreed with some aspects of her opinion, many of the letters opposed her view and disagreed with Daveson condemning poor African Americans and bragging about her own assets. Some of the letter writers, including Lawrence Barclay of Cleveland, Ohio, expressed that although he was an ex-sailor, he would be considered "Black trash" due to his financial status.[412] Letters like these show that although the living conditions of some poor were frowned upon, they still represented real people and lives that were relatable for *Ebony's* audience. Through the lens of social comparison theory, those who identified with the poor saw value in publishing articles about the lives of the less fortunate because it shined a light on the circumstances of their own situation.

The Most Common Letter Themes*:* Tan Confessions

This section will look at the most common letter themes found in the letters selected for publication by the magazine's editor, using examples that can be classified as

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[412] Ibid.

across the reaction scale as Very Positive, Somewhat Positive, Neutral, Somewhat Negative and Negative. These various examples also will be analyzed under the scope of social comparison theory. Here are six of the most common themes that were addressed by letter writers to *Tan Confessions,* in volumes one and two, were the following in order from the most to least common: readers who found the magazine educational/helpful: 75 letters; shared copies/word of mouth on magazine: 45 letters; magazine "for Negroes"/ sharing Negro stories: 40 letters; the concept of image/pride: 28 letters; representation of "average Negro vs. Rich Negro": 15 letters; calling content "trash":12 letters. In this section, the researcher will look at these themes and social comparison theory in an effort to understand how the letter writers might have self-assessed based on the topics discussed in the letters.

One of the interesting things about *Tan Confessions* is that the first issue of the magazine included 11 letters to the editor, which were broken into two categories: "Like Idea of Magazine" and "Object to Confessions." So, before the magazine was even published and available to the audience, Johnson Publishing Company was receiving letters to the editor filled with assumptions and expectations on what the magazine should be. It was interesting that the editors decided to publish these two opposing views in the first magazine because it shows that they were aware of the preconceived ideas people held about the confessions magazine before they even had a chance to read the content.

Seventy-five letters published in volumes one and two mentioned that they found the magazine to be "educational or helpful." It is possible that the editors published these letters in such high volume to counter the negative beliefs that were traditionally held

about confessions magazines and to show that the magazine was well-liked by its audience. These letters, written by both men and women, teenagers and adults, shared the various aspects of the magazine that the letter writer found to be helpful or informational. The first letter that will be reviewed was published in the June 1951 issue and titled "High School Readers" by William Thomas Jr. from Birmingham, Alabama. The letter, which received a Very Positive rating, said:

> I am actually thrilled over the wonderful and exciting *TAN CONFESSIONS* that I've read during the last four months. Each month I race to the newsstand to get my copy. I am a senior at Parker High School in Birmingham and my family really enjoys the magazine. We have decided that *TAN CONFESSIONS* is a contribution to the race as a whole. It has really helped me and taught me different things about life. During the day I concentrate on the various stories I read. However, I wish you could print more stories in the magazine, for I've already finished the copy I have and I've had it only about four hours. "Bad Girl at Large" was magnificent and I must say helpful.[413]

The second letter received a Somewhat Positive rating and was written by John E. Mayer Jr. from Los Angeles, California. In the letter, which was published in April 1952 and titled "Budget Story," he wrote:

> I have recently come into the fold of *TAN CONFESSIONS* readers and I'd like to take this method to voice my deep appreciation for the interesting and well written stories and articles that appear in your magazine each month. After I finish my *CONFESSIONS* I keep a vigil on the newsstand waiting for the next issue. I have only one complaint with *TAN CONFESSIONS*. I find that the stories are rather short, otherwise the magazine as a whole is very educational and in my opinion is setting a pace in Negro journalism. I particularly enjoyed the special feature in the January 1952 issue, "Should Husbands Boss the Family Budget?" Best wishes for continued success.[414]

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[413] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, June 1951.
[414] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, April 1952.

In the first letter, Thomas says that *Tan Confessions* is a "contribution to the race as a whole" and that it "taught me different things about life." Looking at these comments through social comparison theory, we can see that despite the reputation of confessions magazines, Thomas identified with the content in a way that he was open to learning from it. In the second letter, Mayer says he appreciates the stories and articles in the magazine and describes it as "educational." The comment that stood out the most was that he felt the magazine was "setting a pace in Negro journalism." Both writers felt the content was a positive representation of African Americans.

Another common topic was the discussion of *Tan Confessions'* representation of the "average Negro versus the rich Negro." Many of the readers often remarked that *Tan Confessions* only published confessions about good-looking, wealthy and attractive African Americans. Many of the letter writers expressed wanting to see representation from various socioeconomic background and often asked the editors to share the stories of the "average" or "poor." Considering the history of mainstream confessions magazines, like *True Story* and *True Confessions,* that were often being associated with working-class audience, it is interesting to explore the differences in the types of protagonists that were represented in *Tan Confessions*. In *Tan Confessions*, the researcher noted a more glamourous, educated, middle to upper middle-class man or woman. *Tan Confessions* told the stories of the romantic situations of African American men and women. However, it can be assumed that the decision to portray stories that were not of the working class was intentional. Historically, African Americans had been portrayed in the media in a non-favorable way, and Johnson and many of his predecessors purposely

deviated from those portrayals. Johnson's goal was to highlight the triumphs and successful moments of African Americans in both *Negro Digest* and *Ebony*, and it makes sense that he would want to maintain a similar focus with *Tan Confessions*.

Although it was widely thought to be a magazine that was geared toward teens, women and entertainment purposes, the editors published stories of and by people who represented something that African Americans could aspire to and be proud of. When the magazine debuted in 1950, African Americans were still facing a multitude of challenges in America, including racial injustice and financial hardships. The complaint about wanting representation of "average negroes" is one that was prevalent in volume one and two of the magazine. If the editors were going to continue to only portray attractive, well-off African Americans in confessions stories, it is worth exploring why they continuously published letters asking for portrayals of poor, less educated and attractive Black people. It doesn't make sense to acknowledge these complaints and even portray this as a common complaint in audience feedback without making any changes to the content.

This section will look at two examples of letters requesting to see representation of the "average negro," which most likely represented the everyday African American man or woman. The first letter, titled "Wants Average Negroes" was published in August 1951 and written by Jean Delaney from Brooklyn, New York. The letter, which received a Somewhat Positive rating, said:

> I have found your magazine to be one of great interest and enjoyment. I would like to congratulate you and your staff on the fine job you have done. My friends and I sincerely hope that your magazine could be published weekly instead of once a month. We have found but one fault with your magazine, the covers. Why

> can't they be based more on the average Negro? I seem to find them based more on the few, the well-born and the able.[415]

The second letter, titled "Average Negroes" was published in September 1951 and written by Helen Jordan from Birmingham, Alabama. The letter, which received a Somewhat Positive rating, said:

> I have read *TAN CONFESSIONS* up to and including the April issue and frankly I am disappointed. The stories are much too high-class. Why not print stories about the ordinary Negroes? It gets rather sickening for all the stories to be supplied with a couple of Cadillacs, a maid, plus a summer and winter home. When you start printing stories more down to earth, I can assure you your book will be more widely read.[416]

Both letter writers wanted to see representation of everyday people, not just those who were educated with money. Jordan said she felt the magazine would appeal to a wider audience if "average Negroes" and their stories were published in *Tan Confessions*. Although the magazine had high circulation figures and was one of the most popular of JPC's publications, the readers felt that it was not always representative of the everyday man or women. The concept of racial image/pride is one that was addressed in the letters to the editor in both *Ebony* and *Tan Confession* magazines. This section will look at three letters, which received Very Negative and Very Positive ratings. The first letter written by LaVerne E. Ming of Kirkwood, Missouri, was published in February 1951 and titled "Low Literature:"

> I read your magazine from cover to cover and I think it is a disgrace to the Negro. Every ninety-nine out of one-hundred of *TAN CONFESSIONS'* readers will be teen-agers and I don't think that the stories you publish in your magazine are "FIT" for our youth to read. There is enough of that "low literature" on the market

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[415] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, August 1951.
[416] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, September 1951.

> already. Why not publish something that is educational instead of something that may and will cause damage to our youths.[417]

The next letter, which received a Very Negative rating, was written by Louise Carson from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The letter was also titled "Low Literature" and published in February 1951. She said: "After reading your book, it is very easy to understand why we have so much juvenile delinquency. Such filth should never be allowed to contaminate the newsstands."[418]

The final letter titled "Replies to Critics," was written by Merdell Johnson of Florida A&M College and published in March 1951. Johnson said:

> *TAN CONFESSIONS* is just what we need, a magazine of our own so that we may print just what we wish to aid and direct our people. Our race is indeed in need of certain articles that we cannot get from a white magazine and, to, we can get more over to the younger people by having a magazine of this type. Our young people will be buying this magazine and in this book, they will find helpful hints on how to make our race as a whole progress. I searched your magazine closely and carefully to see if it would in any way take a bad effect upon our people. I am indeed proud to say that it does not. Just remember to keep your magazine decent, and on an intelligent and educational base. I do declare that you will prove those people to be wrong who think your book's nothing more than rags in print.[419]

Discussing the image of African Americans and racial pride was common in *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*. The editor's decision to publish numerous letters discussing this topic may be similar to their goal in publishing these letters in *Ebony*. Like *Ebony*, *Tan Confessions* was created to specifically for an African American audience. The magazine's publication goal was to discuss the love, relationship, and marital woes of African Americans, who did not often see their perspectives and stories represented in

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[417] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, February 1951.
[418] Ibid.
[419] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, March 1951.

other magazines. So, the element of racial discussion was to be expected within the publication and amongst readers. Most of the letters published in *Tan Confessions* expressed positive feedback and excitement at the representation of Black relationship stories and the lessons that one could learn from the situations published. This also demonstrates how editors could have wanted to show that despite the reputation of confessions magazines, some of the readers expressed pride in the images and content that were being printed in the magazine.

The letter writers who were published wanted images that represented them in a positive light, so that they could be proud. Many wanted other people, who may have held negative views or who may not have encountered positive representations of African Americans to change their minds. In the first letter, Ming said *Tan Confessions* was a "disgrace to the Negro" and that it would negatively impact youth and teenaged readers. She suggested that they publish educational content. The second letter by Carson cites the magazine as a reason for delinquent behavior in the youth and describes it as "filth."

Looking at this through social comparison theory, Merton (1957) found that individuals compare themselves to people within their own social groups, and to people with the same social status with whom they share no social interaction. Carson and Ming have no interaction with the individuals represented in the confessions, but it can be assumed that they identify with the individuals published, as they are also African American. They are making a comparison of their own values to the ones they believe are represented in the magazine's content and determined that it's "disgraceful" and "filth." Their comments reflect that they do not find the magazine and what it represents

acceptable for African American depiction or youth readers because they make a connection to the magazine and its possible influence on the youth, which *Tan Confessions* easily attracted. Ming is even suggesting that the content be changed from confessionals to educational material, which defies logic because it was always promoted as a confession magazine. In the third letter, Johnson takes a different stance and says African Americans need *Tan Confessions* because it provides content that they cannot read about in other magazines and she believes it will be helpful to young readers. She read it to see if it would "take a bad effect upon our people," which is a concern that Carson and Ming also shared, but in her opinion, the magazine is a positive representation but suggested that they keep it educational and intelligent to continue to be a source of pride for readers like herself.

Some *Tan Confessions* letter writers also called the content "trash" and there were at least 12 letters addressing this. The first letter, which was rated Very Negative and written by Myrtle Hartgrove in Atlanta, Georgia. The letter was published in the December 1950 issue and said the following:

> I just finished glancing through your first issue of *Tan Confessions*, and frankly I feel that you've gone to a lot of trouble to waste a lot of valuable paper. What is the point behind the whole thing? Those stories that you call "true-to-life" are simply impossible. No self-respecting woman, with an ounce of decency, would allow any of those things to happen to her that you have published as "the truth." You should be ashamed to advertise such trash on the same page with such fine publications as *Ebony* and *Negro Digest*.[420]

[420] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, December 1950.

The letter written by Jane White from Los Angeles received a Somewhat Positive rating and was published in the December 1950 issue. White said the following about the magazine:

> Dear Editor: Thanks a lot for coming out with your new magazine, *Tan Confessions*. I am a long time buyer of romantic magazines and while I know that they are trash I would much rather spend my money for "colored trash" than "white trash."[67]

The first letter by Hartgrove says that she does not believe a "self-respecting woman, with an once of decency, would allow any of those things to happen to her…" This sentiment has been common with confessions magazines in general. Because of the private, sometimes sensational and often revealing details of the confessions, some believe that they cannot be true stories. Hartgrove compared *Tan Confessions* to *Ebony* and *Negro Digest*, which were known to be more news-oriented magazines. *Ebony* and *Negro Digest*, which highlighted positive stories and achievement, were viewed as "fine" and *Tan Confessions*, which also told real stories of everyday people, was considered "trash." This relates back to African American representation in the media and wanting to see images that instilled a sense of pride. White on the other hand said that romance magazines are trash, but she'd rather spend her money on a Black magazine.

Many of the *Tan Confessions* letter writers expressed that they were happy to see a confessions magazine "for Negroes" to share their stories. The publishing of these letters reinforces the publication and editor's goals of showing that it was centered around sharing African American love, relationship and marital stories. Although the African American press had been active for decades, *Tan Confessions* was the first Black confessions magazine. Johnson's research prior to establishing the magazine revealed just

how popular confessions magazines were with African American readers and he capitalized on this by presenting a publication with content that he knew well in advance that the audience would like, but made it relatable in the sense that the stories were told by African Americans and some of the situations that the confessions articles discussed were unique to the African American experience. This section will review two letters that mentioned this. The first letter, published in January 1951, was written by Bernice Jackson of Detroit, Michigan. In the letter, titled "Sex Stories," she wrote:

> I have now read your first edition of *TAN CONFESSIONS* and I must say that after reading it, I was very proud to show it to my friends. I can say with sincerity that it has made quite an impression on them too. By that I mean as I read the frank, to-the-point stories and articles about Negro love problems, sex and careers, it gave me a feeling of realness.
>
> Keep up the good work and let no obstacles stand in the way of your progress. As for objections to this type of magazine, there should be none but I see that is not the case, however. Several persons have written in objections to you and I have this to say to them. This so called "trash," as was stated, has been up to now written by white people about white people and read by a large number of our race. If they can publish that sort of literature, why can't we?
>
> Sex is what the world consists of--male and female--so why not talk and write about it? Are any of these objectors neuter?— Strange!! Anything written will be read by someone a large percentage of those someones will be our own people. We help support this "trash" written and published by white people. Why can't we support our own? Every time a person picks up a book, magazine or newspaper, he is definitely not seeking an education but rather seeking amusement and pleasure derived from the contents therein. For those of us seeking education and refinement, patronize our free schools and the colleges.[421]

The second letter, written by Betty Mae Green of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was titled "Please First Reader" and published in December 1951. The letter received a Somewhat Positive rating and said the following:

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[421] Ibid.

> I bought and read *TAN CONFESSIONS* for the first time and I must say that I am glad there is such an outstanding book for Negroes. I do appreciate the magazine. Some of the stories, however, seem like copycatting if I might say. All have happy endings. "I Couldn't Marry My Negro Lover" is probably true. God is good to all colors if we let him be. Being a Southern Negro, I know how that goes. If the writers in these stories in *TAN CONFESSIONS* would give a few more facts and less classic, they would be helping the under-privileged Negroes more. We have what it takes and we are just as good as any race or color and can do anything the next person can do; given a chance we might do better.[422]

Jackson said she was proud of the magazine and her friends felt this way too. She said the confessions stories "gave me a feeling of realness" and explained that sex is a part of life. For those who objected to the magazine, Jackson emphasized that White magazines published similar content and that it was important to support and invest in Black magazines like *Tan Confessions*, which was created to entertain and not provide education or lessons on refined behavior. Looking at Jackson's letter through Social comparison theory, she appears to relate and identify with the content and supports it because she understood that humans are multifaceted beings with various life experiences. There were different publications available for readers with different interests and she recognized the purpose of the confessions magazine and why it included the content that it did. She compared her opinion to those who objected the magazine and seemed to make the point Black people from all walks of life and with various experiences should be represented, not only those who were thought to be more refined, educated and acceptable to those who may have looked down on African Americans.

In the letter from Green, she praised the magazine although she questioned the confessions often having a happy ending, which is not realistic. She related to one of the

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[422] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, December 1951.

protagonists as a Black person living in the South and expressed how she felt that sharing more factual stories would help the underprivileged. She wanted readers to know that African Americans were as good as any other person and could do anything they set their mind to. Green's critique of the confessions stories shows that although she may have liked them, she felt they could be more representative in a way that would appeal to everyday people. The appeal would be in printing stories that they could relate to. In life not all stories have happy endings, so to see stories involving sex, romance and marriage problems, family issues and sometimes loss and crime, and the real outcomes of these situations, it may help someone in a similar situation to solve their problems.

Like with *Ebony*, many readers of *Tan Confessions* shared their copies of the magazine with others or made others aware of the magazine through word of mouth. It can be assumed that the editors may have shared such a high volume of these letters for the same reason they did in *Ebony*—to encourage the spread of news about the magazines via word of mouth and to share ways in which the readers could communicate with other people, which would ultimately increase the reader audience and circulation figures. There were 45 letters to the editor discussing this in volume one and two of *Tan Confessions* and this section will review two of them. The first letter was published in March 1952 and titled "GI's In Korea Like Us." The letter, which was written by Joseph Alston, received a Very Positive rating and said:

> I am writing you about the magazine *TAN CONFESSIONS* from the guys of this company. We find it a very great book and we really enjoy reading it. But I must say we have a hard time keeping up with the copies for when one fellow gets one it is just like getting one thousand dollars. Over here it is tough and I must say it is rather cold but whenever we get a copy of your book everyone is warm for the

> book is really terrific. So from all the fellows in the 55th Engineer Treadway Bridge Co., we say keep the good work up.[423]

The final letter written by Dr. Millard R. Dean from Washington D.C. and titled "Waiting Room Readers." The letter was published in the August 1951 issue of the magazine and received a Very Positive rating. Dr. Dean wrote:

> This letter is easy to write even though *TAN CONFESSIONS* has been an added expense to the regular cost of my waiting room magazines. For the past four or five months or rather since I became acquainted with *TAN CONFESSIONS*, I have found it necessary to purchase four to six copies because my patients either inadvertently or intentionally continue reading it after they leave the office. It pleases me to know that the patients enjoy the book to such an extent as there is no dissatisfaction upon a delayed appointment. I shall continue to buy as many *TAN CONFESSIONS* as necessary to keep one in the waiting room the entire month.[424]

The first letter by Alston shares how he and fellow military members love the magazine and share copies and compliment the editors for their effort. He described how life was difficult for them, but the magazine brought them enjoyment. The second letter by Dr. Dean shares how the magazine is purchased for his waiting room patients. In fact, he purchases several copies because the patients usually take the magazine home with them. These letters just reiterate the pride and enjoyment that some readers experienced from having a confessions magazine of their very own.

Rebranding TAN: From Spicy Stories to Spicy Recipes

This section will compare the content of *Tan Confessions* to the content of *TAN* magazine. When *Tan Confessions* was rebranded to *TAN*, a homemaker's magazine in November 1952, it was the second highest circulating African American magazine after

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[423] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, March 1952.
[424] "Letters to the Editor," *Tan Confessions*, August 1951.

Ebony. In a previous section, it was found that when comparing the letter writer reactions of *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*, both publications comparatively positive reactions. Out of the 350 letters reviewed from *Ebony*, 52.57 percent were rated Very Positive and 14.29 percent were rated Somewhat Positive. Out of the 269 letters reviewed from *Tan Confessions*, 65.80 percent were rated Very Positive and 20.82 percent were considered Somewhat Positive. It was found that *Ebony* more negatively rated letters than *Tan Confessions*. This could be for several reasons, which would require more in-depth research, however this does show that despite the reputation that confessions magazines have historically had for posting "trashy" content, the magazine was well-liked. The circulation figures support this claim.

Although *TAN* magazine had a few similarities to *Tan Confessions*, there were some notable differences in the content published. First, *TAN* was still composed of three sections: "Stories from True Life," "Special Features," and "Home Service Magazine." The "Stories from True Life" section continued to print five to six confession stories monthly. However, the "Special Features" section went from publishing three to four articles on celebrities and love/relationships to publishing two articles of the same nature in *TAN* each month. In *Tan Confessions*, usually the stories in this section were about celebrities but in *TAN*, where the special features were reduced to two articles per issue, they generally published one celebrity story and one love/relationships story. The "Home Service Magazine" section of both *Tan Confessions* and *TAN* published articles on beauty/fashion, family, food, lifestyle/home, and health/medicine.

Out of the 433 articles reviewed in volume one and two of *Tan Confessions*, 157 of them, which included confessions, were about love/relationships. The second most popular content category was beauty/fashion: 54 articles, followed by lifestyle/home: 49 articles and celebrity articles: 48 articles. In the articles reviewed for *TAN*, love/relationships, which included confessions, remained the most popular content category with 91 articles in the third volume. The second most popular article type was lifestyle/home: 26 articles, followed by beauty/fashion and food: 15 articles each and health/medicine and celebrities: 13 articles each. These figures show an overall decrease of celebrity and beauty/fashion articles in *TAN*. These stories were replaced with articles about love, relationships and marriage, such as the column "Dearly Beloved: A Forum on Marriage Problems." Also, this research does not go too in depth about the advertisements featured in the magazines, but it is worth noting that the prominent advertisements for *TAN* centered around fashion, women's products and domestic goods such as Tampax tampons and Felso laundry detergent. These are the kind of products that may appeal to the target audience of homemakers.

The confessions featured in the "Stories from True Life" section of *Tan Confessions* was somewhat controversial due to the sexual content in some of the stories. The letters to the editor, which were published in every magazine, were prominently published at the beginning of each issue, and provided a chance for readers to prominently voice their opinions about the magazine and the stories that were published. After the first issue of *Tan Confessions* was released in November 1950, many of the letters that objected to the publication or offered criticism were related to the confessions.

None of the Very Negative or Somewhat Negative letters were about the content in the "Home Service Magazine." Most of them were about the confessions section and occasionally, some would address a celebrity story from "Special Features." Although many letter writers expressed enjoying the confessions and found them valuable, as an educational tool or even as a precautionary tale to avoid encountering certain situations, they still carried the reputation of being low quality literature.

This is a stigma that had always been associated with confession magazines since the founding of *True Story* in 1919. The magazines that followed the first were always popular amongst readers and maintained record-breaking circulation figures, however they were still critiqued by scholars, other publications and those who found the material to be too raunchy, risqué or revealing. Like the many confession magazines before it, *Tan Confessions* was also well-liked and popular within and outside of its target audience. Some of the letters to the editor were written by White readers who shared how much they enjoyed the magazine or who simply wanted to give their opinion or feedback. However, it seems as if the critical readers may have viewed *Tan Confessions* as a publication representative of African American communities, which is something that many expressed in their letters when they mentioned that the magazine was "for Negroes" or even the pride they felt. It is possible that the readers expected more "positive" representations of African Americans because these are the individuals, they compared their own opinions and values to, expecting to find similarities, in keeping with the social comparison theoretical framework. The magazine was well-supported enough to keep it afloat for two years. It is possible that the readers felt that as an African

American publication, it was the duty of the magazine to uphold certain values, and in the tradition of Johnson Publishing Company's previous publications, positive portrayals of the race. This is another subject that was commonly addressed in letters where readers expressed that the magazine could impact public perception and treatment of African Americans.

As briefly touched on in the literature review, Johnson cared about image and reputation and had often addressed reader concerns or pulled advertisements if they received too many complaints. Johnson was adamant about portraying a positive, uplifting image that would be well perceived not only by his African American readers but also other people who may happen across his publications. This may be part of the reason why he typically portrayed those from a wealthier background in his confession stories. Many of the letters that were selected for printing requested representation of the "average Negro" or everyday person – not just the ones who were educated and well-off. Based upon this, it can be argued that this may have had a direct impact on the decision to rebrand *Tan Confessions*.

Although *TAN* continued to print confessions, the fact that it was marketed as a homemaker's magazine may show that JPC wanted to change the way the magazine was perceived so that it was more accepted amongst its target audience. When looking at this aspect through the lens of social comparison theory, it can be argued that the company may have felt that the confessional magazine was a negative representation of African Americans and therefore, a negative representation of themselves. However, maybe the

idea of a homemaker's magazine symbolized ideals that the readers may have identified as a more accurate representation of themselves and other African American women.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

John H. Johnson was able to successfully create a publishing dynasty that printed magazines with the African American reader in mind. First was *Negro Digest*, which Johnson Publishing Company released in 1942. The publications that followed were *Ebony* (1945) and *Tan Confessions* (1950), which were two magazines that were not only widely circulated among the African American audience, but they were the top two highest circulating Black publications in 1952. *Ebony* was inspired by *Life* magazine and featured news of a social and political nature. Its primary goal was to highlight the achievements and positive aspects of African American life and culture. *Tan Confessions,* a confessions magazine modeled after *True Confessions* was designed to explore the candid, real life stories of love and heartbreak in African American communities. This research paper uses social comparison theory to explore and compare the magazine's content and letters to the editor that were chosen for publication. The printed letters served as a representation of how magazine editors presented the reader reaction to their content because editors selected, edited and published a sample of the letters that were received. The letters, which were often grouped together under a title created by the magazine's editors, does not give the magazine reader a full scope of audience feedback.

When Johnson established *Tan Confessions* in 1950, he made it clear in his letter from the editor that his hopes for the magazine were to provide a publication that would serve as an outlet for African Americans to share their stories of love, heartbreak, marriage and family life. At this point in his career, he had been able to acquire success in a market that was left virtually unexplored by many mainstream magazines and

publications of the day. His business models were simple—he replicated the format of mainstream magazines and modified the content to suit the needs of the African American reader. Since the inception of the first Black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in 1827 and the first Black magazine, the *Mirror of Liberty*, in 1838, the African American press has held a long history of serving as a protest vehicle, a source of information and education and a voice for a group who were often misrepresented in the media and mistreated in society. In their own ways, *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* followed this tradition laid out by its predecessors. Johnson was able to identify a need amongst African American readers and set precedents in his own way.

The author's examination of the content in both *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* included an analysis of the articles and the letters to the editor of volumes one and two of both magazines. The researcher created a list of all articles from both publications and categorized them into 25 content categories. From the review of the magazine content it was found that most of *Ebony's* articles were biographical or profiles of prominent individuals and businesses and *Tan Confessions*, which published confessions in addition to other content, was primarily made up of articles that focused on love/relationships and celebrities. When reviewing the letters to the editors, it was found that *Ebony* published more letters from male readers and printed more letters that identified the letter writer's profession or affiliations with professional organizations. *Tan Confessions* printed letters from more women and teen readers. Both publications printed many letters from military readers.

The researcher created a five-point scale to measure the reactions of the letters that were selected for publication and it included the following values: Very Positive, Somewhat Positive, Neutral, Somewhat Negative and Very Negative. When analyzing the 350 letters to the editor from volumes one and two of *Ebony*, the researcher found that most of letters contained positive reactions and feedback from the letter writers. The 269 letters reviewed from volumes one and two of *Tan Confessions* were also overwhelmingly positive. Although both publications published letters that included some criticism and negative feedback. However, the feedback published in both magazines was mostly positive. It is impossible to know, however, if editors of the magazines decided to publish fewer negative letters to the editor in order to control publicity about the two editorial products.

The researcher also analyzed the most common themes in the letters to the editor and found that the most common topic in *Ebony* printed letters were the concept of racial image/pride, and the most common theme in *Tan Confessions* printed letters was readers who found the magazine educational or helpful. Some other common themes which appeared in both publications were people who shared physical copies of the magazines or spread word about them verbally; people who called the content "trash" and the discussion of sexual or risqué topics. Multiple letters to the editor were analyzed using the framework of social comparison theory, in order to aid in understanding of how the magazines may have been perceived by their audiences.

From the examples cited in the discussion section, it was found that the letters printed presented writers who compared their values and self-assessment through the

content in the magazines and they analyzed how these portrayals may have reflected on themselves as individuals and as African Americans. As a publication that specifically targeted the African American audience, those common cultural ties, values are what connected them to the publication, and what linked them as individuals within African American communities. This may have also had an impact on the editor's decisions when deciding what letters to print as a representation of audience feedback. Prior research showed that confessions magazines provided a public therapeutic outlet for confession writers. *Tan Confessions* may have allowed some readers to compare their own opinions in a social text because the magazine was nationally distributed, meaning that it reached a wide African American audience and a reader base outside of the African American communities, as well. The magazine did have international readers, many of which were in the military.

The rebrand from *Tan Confessions* to *TAN* took place during the height of the magazine's success in November 1952. Although the letters to the editor section represented the editor's perception of audience feedback, which was overwhelmingly positive, unless the researcher had access to all unedited letter submissions it would be difficult to determine what role audience feedback played in the rebranding of *Tan Confessions* to *TAN*, because the published letters to the editor went through a gate-keeping process before being printed and they were not in their original form but one that was edited and pre-approved by magazine editors. Based upon the feedback in the letters that were published, it is clear that the magazine was well-liked and this is supported by the magazine's circulation figures at the time of the rebrand. It can be assumed that the

choice to rebrand to a homemaker's magazine was most likely due to Johnson Publishing Company and its editors. Further research would be needed to determine what truly impacted this decision. However, the assessment of the letters to the editor that were published, and the magazine's circulation figures at the time appear to go against the decision to rebrand.

The research concluded that the long-held stigma associated with confession magazines as being low quality and "trashy" content may have had an impact on this change which was a decision likely made by Johnson Publishing Company and its editors. Despite *Tan Confessions* being well-liked, as indicated by high circulation figures, it is likely that the company had its own ideas about representation and what was deemed acceptable. Johnson was known to be very conscientious of how he portrayed members of African American communities and the issues that impacted them. Magazine editors often printed letters that discussed how *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions* may impact public perception, reputation and treatment of African American communities. They wanted to provide content that would instill a sense of pride. Johnson took the reputation of his publications very seriously and the complaints about the confessions may have impacted the decision to rebrand. Although *TAN* was marketed as a magazine for homemakers, the magazine continued to publish confessions. However, unlike *Tan Confessions*, *TAN* published few stories about celebrities, beauty and fashion and more stories about love, relationships and marriage. *TAN* was published until October 1971. In late 1971, the magazine was renamed *Black Stars* and focused on celebrity-oriented stories.

This research is relevant because Johnson Publishing Company printed publications that were culturally significant and groundbreaking in Black publishing history. This research speaks to Johnson's desire to continue the tradition of the Black press that was established well before him—he celebrated the accomplishments and lives of Black people with the goal to uplift. Johnson wasn't known to publish content on controversial or militant topics, but his aim was to foster and promote cultural pride. Although Johnson was inspired by pioneer publications like The Chicago Defender, he adopted his own approach which became greatly successful. Magazines like *Negro Digest*, *Ebony*, *Jet* and *Tan Confessions* were modeled after mainstream publications but the content and identity they maintained were uniquely their own and truly embodied one of the key tenants of journalism: providing a voice to the voiceless. These magazines shared the stories of African Americans in a way that had never been done before and for many of its loyal reader base, the magazines were a staple and a key part of their everyday lives, news consumption and entertainment.

The year 2020 marked *Ebony's* 75th anniversary and although the magazine ended publication, it will always be highly regarded as an important American publication. The magazine's memorable moments will live on through the *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine photo archives housed at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the photo archives are composed of approximately 3.35 million negatives and slides, 983,000 photographs, 166,000 contact sheets and 9,000 audio and visual recordings. The photographs chronicle 75 years of history and document some of the most well-known figures and moments in

history. This archive provides decades of history and information and will undoubtedly serve as an asset to historians and a well of knowledge for the Smithsonian's visitors.

The research, notably the analyses of the letters to the editor, demonstrates how important these magazines were to the African American communities who made connections to their own culture, identity and values through the images, people and stories published in the magazines. The letters that were printed expressed how they looked to the magazines as a key part of their public representation Whether they liked the magazines or did not like the magazines, the readers represented in the letters to the editor section thought of them as vessels to educate, uplift, share their stories and provide the public with a look into their everyday lives as they lived them. JPC's publications were unlike many of the publications that came before them and most of the letter writers thought positively of the magazines, looked forward to their growth and celebrated the ways in which they shared the often-ignored aspects of Black life.

Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that this paper has the following limitations: The researcher did not have access to *Ebony's* first issue: Volume 1, Issue one published in November of 1945 or to the June 1946 issue, which would have been useful in analyzing the content printed in the magazine's first issue. The researcher created a five-point scale for measuring the audience reaction expressed in the letters to the editor: Very Positive, Somewhat Positive, Neutral, Somewhat Negative and Negative. The scale was inspired by the Likert Scale but tweaked to measure reader reaction. Some of the letters could have been categorized in between these variables or could be just generally

classified as Positive or Negative. Any letter that did not directly discuss the publication or feedback on its content was automatically classified as Neutral. This includes any letters of social commentary, general topics or photos submitted to *Ebony*.

Most of the articles categorized under the 25 subject categories listed in this research can be classified under multiple subject categories. The researcher categorized the articles according to the most dominate topic discussed in the article. When compiling a list of *Ebony's* articles, the researcher used the content list from Beeghly Library's electronic database, MasterFILE Premier, to compile the list of articles from volume one and volume two of *Ebony*. The database, which has a record of every issue of *Ebony* published, listed the name of each article along with a detailed summary of the article. However, a possible limitation is that the researcher did not have access to the table of contents and the electronic content list may not have completely recorded every article and column published just as the table of contents for *Tan Confessions* and *TAN* did not list every article or column published. Also, the researcher does not have the names of the authors for the *Ebony* articles. Between the first and second volumes of both *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*, the editors published different numbers of Letters to the Editor. There were 350 letters published in *Ebony* and 269 published in *Tan Confessions*. Due to there being an unequal number of letters being compared, this could have an impact on making the most accurate possible assessment and comparison, when evaluating how each magazine was received by the letter writers/audience.

When reviewing the letter ratings in the discussion section, the researcher only analyzed select examples of each of the most common letter themes in the discussion

section. The study looked at all 619 letters to the editor between *Ebony* and *Tan Confessions*, and each letter was assigned a rating. But when it came to analyzing the letters through social comparison theory, the letters were randomly selected. Not all of the 619 letters that were rated were analyzed through social comparison theory, so there is a lot of room for further, more in-depth assessments.

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