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# ANALYSIS | Crime levels, alcohol and Covid-19 lockdowns

news24 Guy Lamb

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Police Minister Bheki Cele briefs the media on the annual crime statistics. GCIS

In order to determine if alcohol plays a role in crime spikes, it needs to be determined where violent crime is concentrated, as well as consider other possible factors that may have contributed to such variations in crime in these precincts, writes **Guy Lamb**.

In July 2020, the Minister of Police, Bheki Cele released the quarterly crime statistics for the period 1 April - 30 June 2020, which corresponded with much of the "hard" Covid-19 lockdown phase in South Africa.

The minister celebrated "a never-seen-before rosy picture of a peaceful South Africa experiencing a crime holiday". Indeed, the SAPS crime data for the period 1 April - 30 June 2020 showed an overall 37% reduction in violent interpersonal crime compared to the same period in 2018/19.

The lockdown effect on violent interpersonal crime was not surprising as criminological theories hold that violent crime occurs in places where perpetrators meet victims, with such interactions being influenced by the nature of the place, crime facilitators (such as guns and alcohol) and the presence of police.

The "hard" lockdown severely restricted the movement of South African across the country, and hence the likelihood of victim/perpetrator interactions were significantly reduced. Alcohol was in short supply and there was a dramatic increase in patrols by police and soldiers especially in high crime areas.

### Increase in crime

The Minister of Police has subsequently released the quarterly crime data for July to September 2020, as well as October to December 2020.

Both quarterly data sets have shown a significant increase in violent crime since the lifting of the "hard" lockdown in May 2020. The most recent quarterly crime data (October to December 2020) indicates that violent crime levels actually increased compared to the same period in 2019, with murders having risen by 6.6% and attempted murder by 8.7%.

Much of the public discourse about the fall and rise of reported violent interpersonal crime in 2020 has centred around access to and consumption of alcohol, with various commentators suggesting that the banning of alcohol sales during hard lockdown was the key determinant of the crime drop.

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Indeed, there have been numerous studies, both locally and internationally that have robustly demonstrated the link between excessive alcohol consumption and violence perpetration.

Alcohol consumption and arguments are a particularly lethal combination.

SAPS has consistently reported that most murders and attempted murders are the outcome of arguments and misunderstandings, which often take place in the context of drinking.

However, there is more to violent crime variances in South Africa than alcohol consumption. However, there is more to violent crime variances in South Africa than alcohol consumption.

### Crime concentration

A careful review of the most recent quarterly crime data indicates that the perpetration of violent crime is concentrated in less than 20% of the more than 1 100 police precincts in South Africa.

Furthermore, most murders, for example, take place in around 100 such precincts.

An analysis of violent crime dynamics in these areas prove insightful with respect to understanding changes in crime patterns.

That is, there were 389 more murders between 1 October and 31 December 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

Interestingly, close to half of all of these "excess" murders took place in only eight policing precincts, namely: Kraaifontein (42); Harare, Khayelitsha (30); Manenberg (28); Plessislaer (25); Lenasia (20); Samora Michel (16); Dutywa (15); and Mfuleni (14). Kraaifontein, Manenberg, Mfuleni and Plessislaer also account for a 17% all "excess" attempted murder cases.

Kraaifontein and Manenberg have become epicentres of the resurgent gang war in Cape Town, with gangster-on-gangster assassinations being a frequent occurrence in late-2020. Similarly, gang violence and retaliations have continued to plague Lenasia.

There have been a number of mass shootings in the Harare and Mfuleni related to local-level organised crime.

There has also been an increase in the dumping of murder victims in the dune areas close to the ocean in the Harare precinct. There has been ongoing lawlessness in Samora Machel, and Plessislaer has been consistently characterised by political assassinations, taxi violence and murders linked to robberies.

### Next crime stats will be revealing

This is not to say that excessive alcohol consumption has not contributed to murders in these eight precincts.

Undeniably, there have been various cases of murders associated with intoxicated arguments, and killings brought on by drunken rage. Nonetheless, an important point to be emphasised is that multiple factors influence the variability of violent crime levels in South Africa.

The next SAPS quarterly crime statistics (January to March 2021) will be particularly revealing as they will include the period in which alcohol sales were banned by government for a month.

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If violent crime levels decline significantly over this quarter, then it may be tempting to link the reduced alcohol consumption exclusively to the crime drop.

However, before doing this, it is essential to first determine where violent crime is concentrated, as well as consider other possible factors that may have contributed to such variations in crime in these precincts.

If studies reveal alcohol to be a key driver of violence in such areas, then it would be prudent for government to consider measures to effectively restrict access to alcohol in these precincts.

- Dr Guy Lamb is a criminologist with the Department of Political Science at Stellenbosch University.

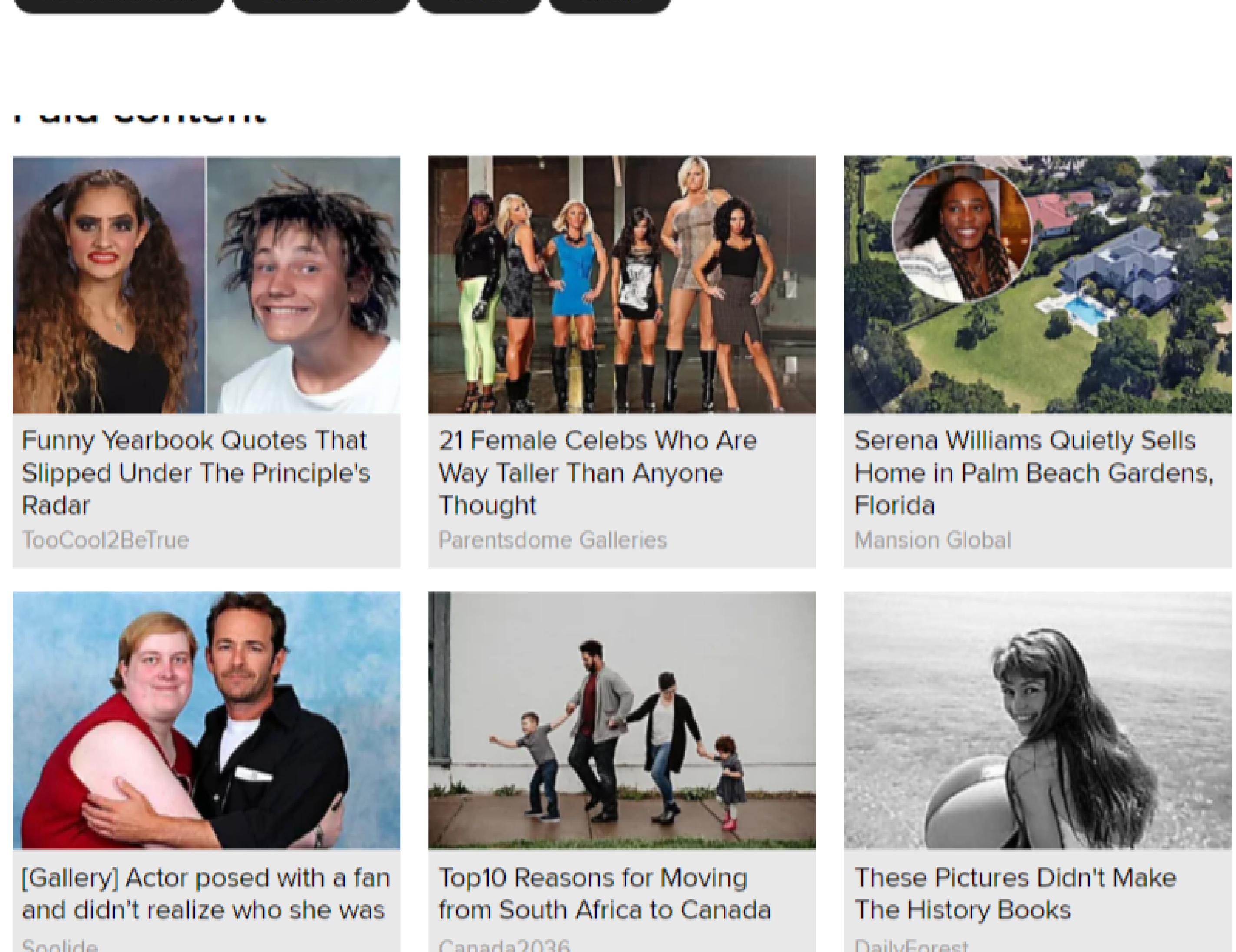
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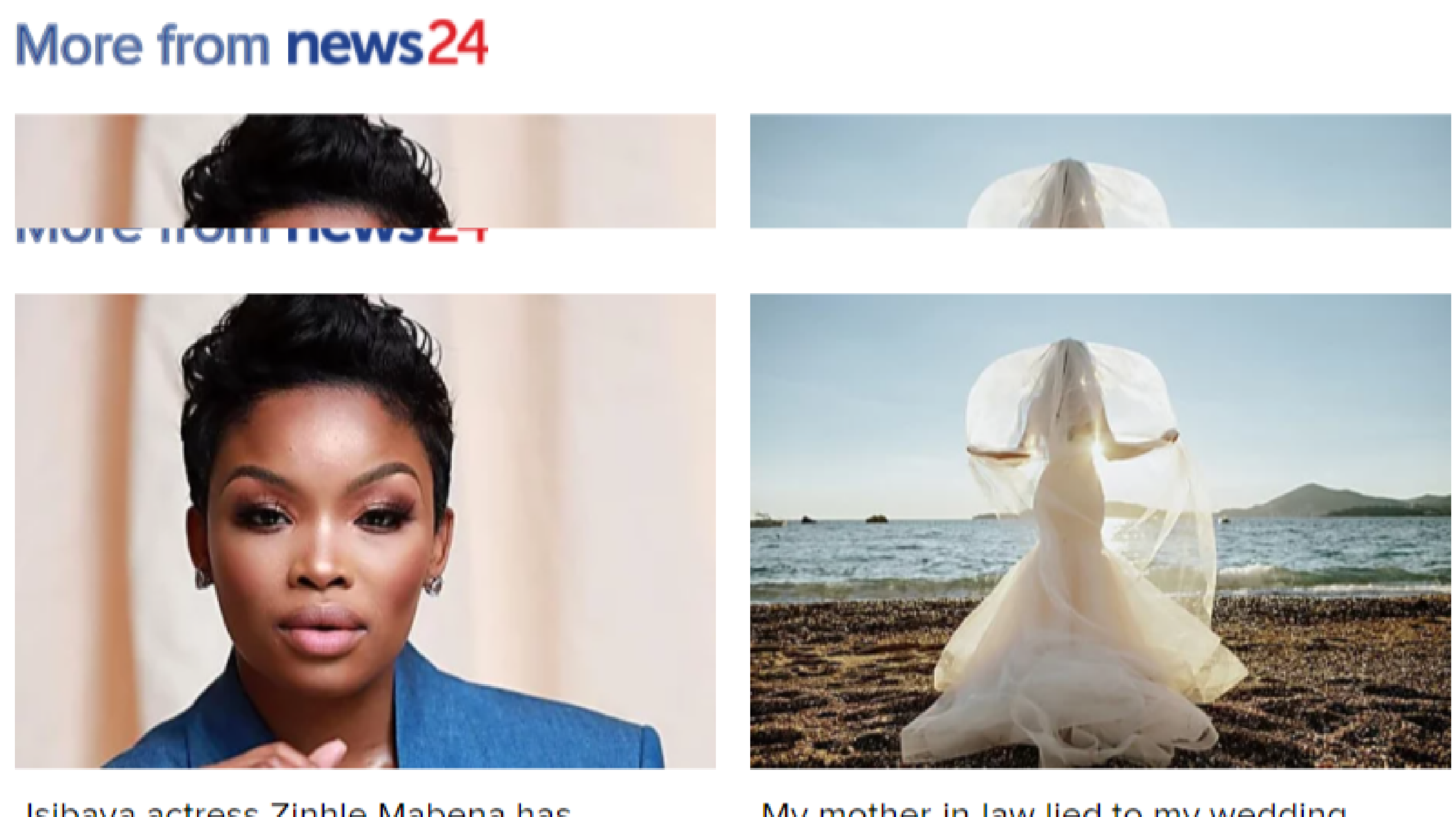
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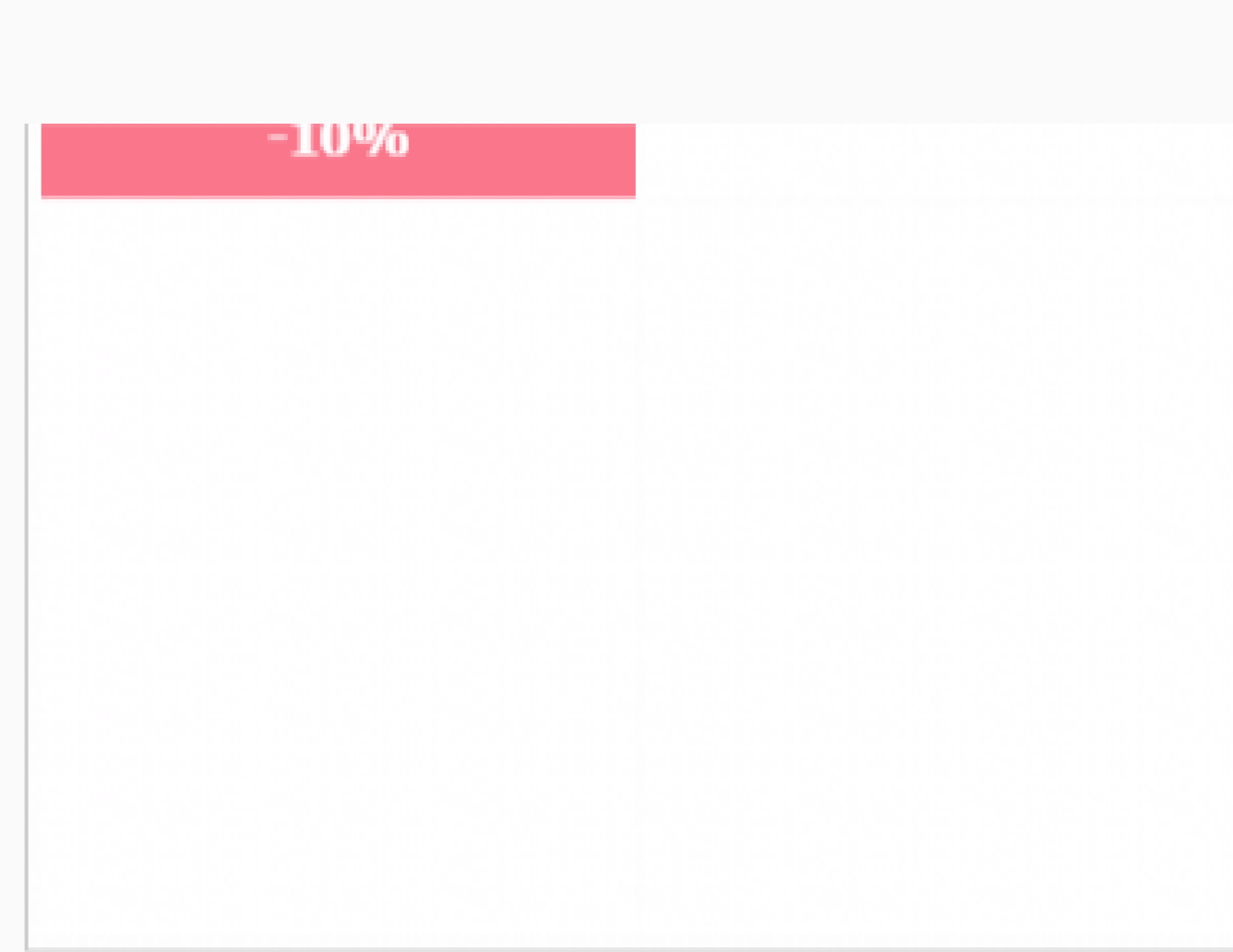
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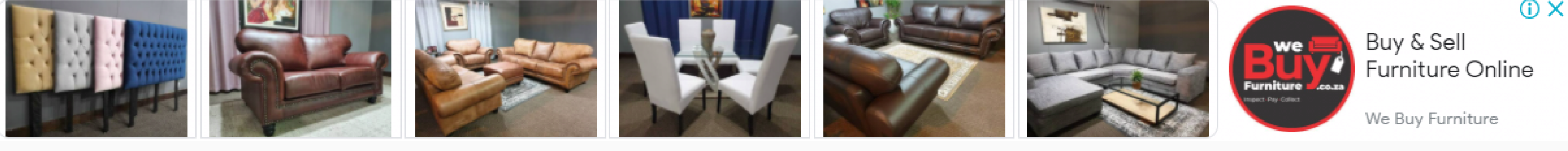
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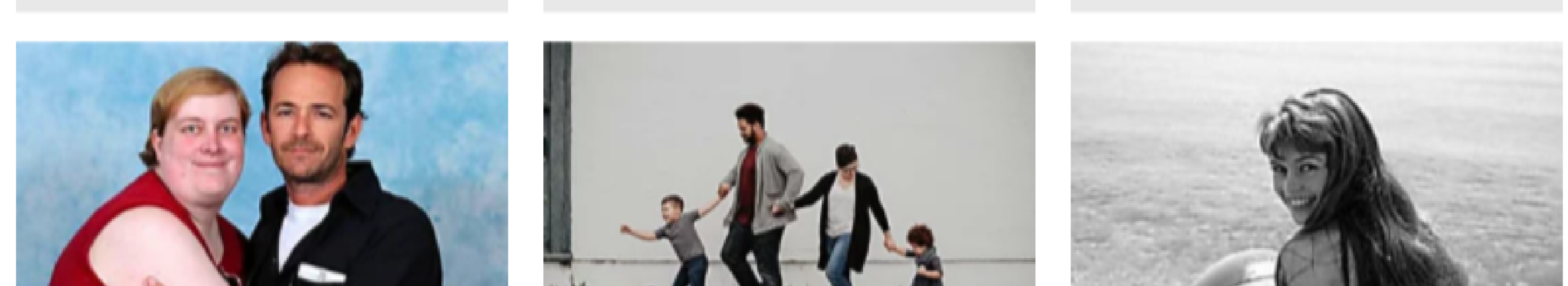
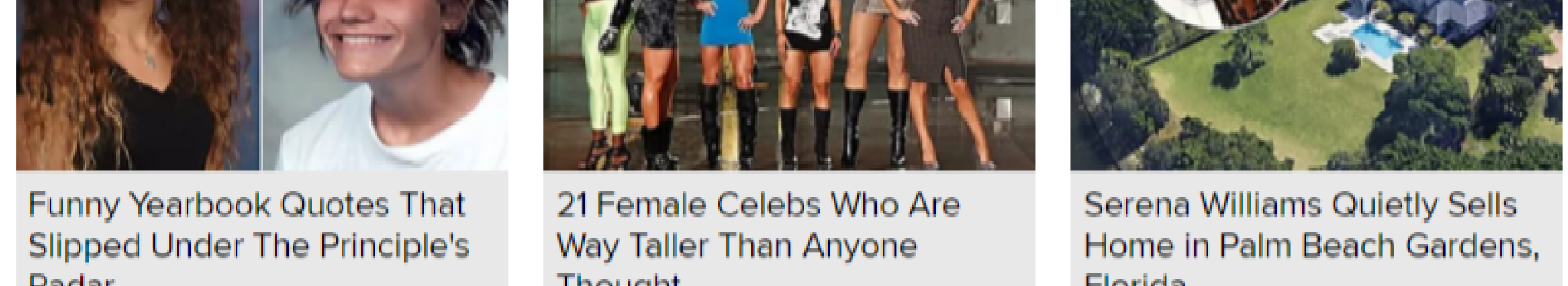
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