Get Unstuck! Pandemic Positivity Imperatives and Self-Care for Women

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Abstract Examining women's magazines and lifestyle coaching, the article explores how positivity imperatives in contemporary culture call forth a happy, confident, hopeful, and vibrant subject during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis shows how these positivity imperatives acknowledge stress and difficulty, and at times highlight their gendered impacts, yet nevertheless systematically figure responses and solutions in individual, psychological, and often consumerist terms. The discussion demonstrates how positivity imperatives operate not only through verbal advice but also through visual, embodied, and affective means and through an emphasis on developing new social practices—from holding one's body differently, to keeping gratitude journals, to cultivating a new virtual persona for online work meetings. The article highlights a profound paradox: in times of a global pandemic that has affected women disproportionally, and when structural injustices and inequalities have been made ever more visible, positivity and individualized self-care interpellations to women flourish, anger is muted, and critiques of structural inequality are largely silenced. Thus, seemingly benign and often undoubtedly well-meaning messages of confidence, calm, and positivity during the pandemic work to buttress a neoliberal imaginary and persistent social inequalities.

Keywords COVID-19, neoliberalism, confidence, women's magazines, coaching

> Did 2020 snatch your vision and delay your goals? . . . we know and understand how you feel and want to give you some of the tips and techniques we use to get unstuck.
>
> **—The Confidence Coach**

> Be kind to your self—with extra soft nightwear and calming homeware.
>
> **—Promotional email from department store**

> Lean in to positive solitude during lockdown!
>
> **—Wellness app**

> New styles with a positivity palette.

—Women's fashion store

It's amazing what can happen when you pause.

—Charity appeal

Some of the self-care and positivity messages we received on January 27, 2021

Incitements to happiness and positivity have been an increasingly prominent feature of the cultural landscape of Western societies for at least a decade—particularly in media addressed to women (Favaro and Gill 2019). From Instagram influencers boasting their #PMA (positive mental attitude), to makeover shows that seek to generate "self-love" or to "spark joy," to an expanding greetings card and gift industry exhorting us to "live love laugh" and "dance like nobody's watching," messages promoting inspiration and affirmation have become ubiquitous. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, such "positivity imperatives" have both proliferated significantly and taken on a new intensity in response to the multiple crises associated with the virus: states of emergency and lockdown; economic crises, rising unemployment, and poverty; and widespread grief, distress, and mental health challenges. Many societies, including the United Kingdom, became awash with a "new sentimentalism" characterized by multiplying discourses of hope, gratitude, and resilience, seen vividly in the examples above that represent only a small proportion of similar messages received on just one day while writing this article. "Staying positive" and practicing "self-care" became motifs throughout the pandemic, seen in everything from exhortations to exercise, breathe deeply, and sleep better; to the promotion of "uplifting" tunes, "comfort(ing)" food, and "feel good" TV; to the spread of the rainbow symbol across clothes, homes, and public spaces in 2020. These "positivity imperatives" are our focus here.

A small body of critical literature has begun to discuss such discourses in a UK context. Some have investigated their classed and racial occlusions and the way they erase profound inequalities. Others have questioned the nationalistic hubris and nostalgic harking back to the so-called blitz spirit and wartime slogans of "keep calm and carry on." Still other scholarship has indicted companies from supermarkets to fashion chains for cynical "carewashing" or "wokewashing," highlighting the disjuncture between brands' caring or diversity-positive promotional messages and the unsafe and/or exploitative working conditions of their employees (Chatzidakis et al 2020; Kay and Wood 2020; Sobande 2020). We build on these critiques, but our aim here is slightly different. We direct our gaze to the field of self-help,

and specifically to the kinds of self-help advice and support targeted at women during the pandemic, with its emphasis on being happy, kind, positive, and mindful. Our aim is to critically examine these exhortations to positivity, interrogating contradictory injunctions to be "bold" and "confident" while "embracing your vulnerability," to strive to "be your best self" while "giving up on the need to be perfect." Such phrases, we argue, have become part of the "wallpaper" of contemporary culture: utterly familiar but largely unexamined, they are part of the way in which neoliberal notions have inserted themselves into the "nooks and crannies of everyday life" (Littler 2018: 3). These ideas, we contend, should represent a key object of analysis for those interested in cultural politics. They are potent, performative, and ideological—the more so because of their success in passing themselves off as politically innocent or benign.

Our focus is on self-help or self-care discourses targeted at women in the UK since the start of the pandemic. The UK has fared extremely badly in dealing with COVID-19: it has one of the highest death rates in the world (the highest when measured by deaths as a proportion of the population [Goodier and Scott 2021]) and very high rates of infection and hospitalization. The UK population has been subject to multiple lockdowns lasting many weeks or months on each occasion, in which schools, workplaces, and all "non-essential" venues from cinemas, theatres, and nightclubs to sports venues, galleries and museums, and bars and restaurants have been closed. At the time of writing, nearly a million people have lost their jobs during the pandemic, with many hundreds of thousands of others furloughed or facing uncertain employment futures. A growing mental health catastrophe is also documented in reports detailing crises among particular groups (for example children, young people, key workers); spiraling rates of loneliness, anxiety, and depression; and rising numbers of suicides.

Experiences of the pandemic have been shaped by the multiple, egregious, and well-documented intersectional inequalities that characterize British society, a society in which 14.5 million people lived below the poverty line, even before the devastating impacts of the pandemic (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2021). Mortality and morbidity from the virus are strongly correlated with age, ethnicity, and social class/deprivation. Moreover, voluminous evidence suggests this is also a crisis shaped by gender. The location of women as the majority of key workers in health, social care, and retail sectors (Scott 2020); the uneven effects of redundancies and furloughs that hit women disproportionately (Andrew et al. 2020); the closure of schools and nurseries and the dramatically unequal impact of homeschooling by gender (OECD 2020); and the "shadow pandemic" of spiralling rates of

domestic violence (Mlambo-Ngcuka 2020) are among the many factors that have led to numerous reports suggesting that women are the "shock absorbers" of the pandemic, and that it may set back the cause of gender equality "to the 1950s." It is against this sobering backdrop that we examine the contemporary proliferation of incitements to joy, calm, resilience, and gratitude targeted at women. We highlight a paradox: that at precisely a moment when structural inequalities and injustices become so visible in media, women are insistently interpellated with individualistic, psychologized forms of address.

The remainder of the article is divided into five sections. In the first we situate our interest in relation to critical discussions about self-help and its transformations. Next, we discuss scholarly engagements with happiness, public mood, and positive psychology. We then set out our approach, some notes of caution, and the questions we address. The fourth and fifth sections are the empirical heart of the article, focusing on two cases studies from among the proliferating injunctions to women to be positive, weather the crisis, and emerge from it stronger and better. We argue that such self-help messages acknowledge stress and difficulty, at times highlighting their gendered impacts, but nevertheless systematically figure responses and solutions in individual, psychological, and often consumerist terms. We show that positivity imperatives operate not only through verbal advice but also through visual, embodied, and affective means and through an emphasis on developing new social practices—from holding one's body differently, to keeping gratitude journals, to cultivating a new virtual persona for online work meetings. In our conclusion we draw together the threads of the argument, showing how seemingly benign (and often undoubtedly well-meaning) attention to confidence, calm, and positivity during the pandemic works to buttress a neoliberal imaginary and persistent social inequalities.

Self-Care Society

One way of situating the contemporary proliferation of positivity imperatives is in relation to the growing significance of self-help, both as a global multi-million-dollar industry and as a cultural matrix through which we are invited to know (and improve) ourselves. Self-help is disproportionately addressed to women, with femininity long identified as a "problematic object in need of change" (Riley et al. 2019: 3). A rich feminist literature critiques the way self-help creates a "re-privatization" (Peck 1995: 75) of structural inequalities, turning the notion of "the personal as political" upside down as the outcomes of social injustice are refigured as personal failures. The subject called forth by self-help is what Micki McGee

(2005) dubs the “belaboured self” incited to work on and upgrade every aspect of one’s life from diet, to sex, to parenting, to being a good friend or a good boss.

Self-help is always changing, in response to multiple trends and forces. One notable recent shift can be seen in the content and tonal quality of self-help discourses that have changed under the influence of feminism, neoliberalism, and social media cultures. McGee (2005) argues that self-help has become an increasingly individualistic enterprise. Indeed, we would go further and argue that self-help is increasingly figured in psychological terms calling on subjects to look inside themselves and to foster and develop new attitudes and dispositions. Sarah Riley and colleagues (2019: 9) make a related argument that we are seeing the “postfeminization” of self-help, particularly as it relates to increasingly salient discourses of self-acceptance. This “marries seemingly pro-feminist sentiments of body positivity and self-acceptance with appearance concerns that tie women’s value back to their bodies, the consumption of products, and the blurring of economic and psychological language” (9; see also Henderson and Taylor 2018). In all these respects it is possible to see the entanglements and contradictory impacts of popular feminism and neoliberalism on self-help, and with them more “positive” injunctions to confidence, boldness, defiance, and dreaming big or daring greatly. These same forces are shaping the morphing of self-help discourses into injunctions to self-care, which are not only more expansive but also marked by the space they allow for difficult experiences and feelings including failure and vulnerability (see Orgad and Gill 2022). Elsewhere we discuss how new emphases on vulnerability, distress, and failure are not antithetical to the positivity complex but intimately entangled in it (Orgad and Gill, forthcoming; see also Ciccone 2020).

Another set of shifts is seen in the expansion, blurring, and dispersion of self-help. Extensive research in media and cultural studies has documented that self-help has spread out to include a vast lifestyle media whose purpose is to entertain us while offering up different models of living to inspire self-transformation (Ouellette 2016). Reality TV shows, makeover programs, celebrity culture, and a multiplicity of social media influencers are part of this shift, regarded by many as exemplifying soft forms of power that are as effective in changing social attitudes (Hall, Massey, and Rustin 2015) as more obvious forms of control or governance. Not only is self-help traversing different media, but it also changes in the process. New hybrids are emerging as self-help blurs with novels, memoirs, comedy, and fictional performances that are drawn on intertextually and make it complicated to draw firm boundaries around self-help.

This dynamic has been cemented and accelerated during the pandemic, in a move marked by the veritable takeover of self-care discourses in multiple arenas of social and cultural life. No longer confined to particular genres or media, self-care and positivity injunctions are everywhere: in communications from our bank, the supermarket, the charities who want us to donate—all urging us to "feel good," "take a moment," "be kind," or "get some love." This marks an extension and intensification of the diffusion of therapeutic notions across the polity (Illouz 2008): we are witnessing the development of a self-care society (Gill and Orgad, forthcoming). Such a diffusion of self-care messages offers a glimpse of some of the distress and pain that exist during the pandemic and lockdowns, while also rerouting solutions back through an individualized and psychologized circuit.

New technologies are further augmenting this—particularly the proliferating self-care smartphone apps. The visibility and prominence of these apps have increased dramatically during the COVID-19 crisis, offering individuals facing intolerable strains programs of support, in the absence of adequate psychological or public health services, or indeed funding to support basic needs such as food, heating, and winter clothing. Evidence shows how during the pandemic self-care apps were particularly targeted at women, and disproportionately at women of color, through their roles as teachers, nurses, care-givers, and retail staff (ACG 2020; Lehmann 2020). Indeed, a McKinsey report in 2020 identifies the growth of self-care apps—already identified in 2018 by Apple as their "app trend of the year"—as one of the biggest health and consumer trends, driven largely by women and millennials. As we have discussed in relation to confidence and resilience apps (Gill and Orgad 2018; Orgad and Gill 2022), the continuous, always-on, always-with-you nature of many self-care apps represents an intensification in self-care practices: quite different from other media, they offer nudges, feeds, and notifications throughout the day, inciting users to "check in" and give instant feedback on their current mood, with algorithms that offer positivity quotes, breathing exercises, or prompts to note down things you feel grateful for.

Taken together, these trends point to the intensification of self-care messages and their blurring and diffusion across all spheres of life with general injunctions to positive thinking, resilience, and confidence.

The Positivity Complex, Happiness, and the Psychic Life of Neoliberalism

Injunctions to positivity are part of wider trends related to happiness, wellness, and mindfulness, in which the huge growth and reach of positive psychology are central (Binkley

2011; Cabanas and Illouz 2019). Associated with the work of Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, positive psychology has sought to entirely reconfigure the discipline, shifting its focus from pathology and negative states to a concern with well-being, resilience, and flourishing. This programmatic reinvention is based on the idea that happiness can be created and inculcated through "positive education" and the systematic application of techniques that promote self-belief and gratitude. A full assessment of this project is beyond the scope of this article (but see Binkley 2015; Cabanas and Illouz 2019); however, we seek to highlight the continuity between this new scientific field and the everyday imperatives to happiness, glow, and confidence—seen across popular and consumer culture—that are the subject of our analysis here.

Happiness economics, exemplified by the work of Richard Layard, has further extended the reach of such notions, formulating multiple indices by which the well-being of not just individuals but also entire nation-states can be measured—with the results in turn used as part of national branding strategies that vary from "best place to live" surveys to global happiness rankings. William Davies (2015) identifies a "happiness industry" and Carl Cederström and Andre Spicer (2014) a "wellness syndrome" that promote and disseminate such ideas, which are increasingly figured as moral goods and personal responsibilities. In turn, Ronald Purser (2019: 3) argues that the "mindfulness conspiracy" has not only "depoliticised stress" but also become "a tool of self-discipline disguised as self-help." New technologies, the affordances of big data, and shifts to new forms of surveillance capitalism are further transporting a variety of powerful actors—from social media giants to governments—still deeper into the terrain of mood monitoring, and affective and behavioral "nudging" (Barker 2018; Davies 2018; Zuboff 2019)—an issue that urgently requires further critical study.

A lacuna in some critiques of happiness, wellness, and mindfulness has been attention to the ways in which their injunctions are unevenly addressed to different groups (Blackman 2004). Recent writing has considered this in relation to the colonialism (Shome 2014) and spiritual neoliberalism (Williams 2014) of wellness culture, with some current research beginning to explore how commercial constructions of positive health—from "clean eating" to "Goop"—are shaped by whiteness and by gender (Gill and Orgad 2018; O'Neill 2020a).

Our perspective builds on this critical literature and understands imperatives to positivity and self-care in relation to a "psychological turn" in neoliberalism, that is always-already gendered, classed, and racialized. Our interest is not in neoliberalism as a macro economic or political rationality but as a quotidian sensibility that has become a kind of hegemonic

common sense. Indeed, we go further in focusing on the "psychic life of neoliberalism" (Scharff 2016). Our work is animated by attention to power, culture, and subjectivity, and to questions about how what is "out there" gets "in here" to shape our sense of self (Gill 2008). It is situated in a tradition that sees contemporary injunctions to positivity as "implicated in a more general logic of neoliberal subjectification" (Binkley 2011: 372) and as part of the spread of the (positive) "psy complex" (Rose 1990: 2).

Much research has highlighted the "calculating" and "entrepreneurial" nature of the subjectivity incited by neoliberalism. However, our critique pushes beyond overly rationalized accounts. On the one hand, we highlight fractures and contradictions to avoid tautological analyses in which the "bad guys" are always-already identified in advance ("it was neoliberalism what done it, guv") (Clarke 2007; Phelan 2014). For example, we study the confidence cult(ure) but also the turn to vulnerability, and we note that happiness imperatives are also accompanied by particularly heightened visibilities of distress (see also Franssen 2020; Thelandersson 2020). On the other hand, we are also interested in the affective dimensions of neoliberalism—the way its injunctions work by attempting to shape not only thought or behavior but also feelings. In this we draw on research that seeks to explore "the feeling rules of neoliberalism" (Kanai 2019; Gill and Kanai 2018). Being positive, no matter how difficult or injurious your conditions of existence, we argue, is precisely one such feeling rule.

Words and Ambivalence: An Affective-Discursive Approach

We use an affective-discursive (Wetherell 2015) approach to illuminate contemporary self-care and positivity imperatives during COVID-19. Margaret Wetherell (2015) has offered a thoroughly social rereading of affect. It rejects the idea that affect is a "pre-personal and extra-discursive force hitting and shaping bodies" (143), arguing that it is social, patterned, and implicated in power relations. Importantly, this makes affect amenable to rigorous analysis and empirical study. In our recent work on confidence (Gill and Orgad 2015, 2018; Orgad and Gill 2022), we have shown that the cultural prominence of these dispositions is not limited to words; it is, as Rachel O'Neill (2020b: 628) puts it, a "more-than-textual" phenomenon. Indeed, what is striking is how confidence materializes across culture not simply as a set of verbal imperatives such as "love your body!" or "believe in yourself" but also as a visual regime characterized by a relatively stable set of signifiers related to posture, dress, pose, gaze (standing tall, facing forward, striding out purposefully); an affective

regime calling on women to feel differently; and as a multiplicity of practices, "techniques, knowledges and apparatuses designed to measure, assess, market, inspire and manufacture self-confidence" (Orgad and Gill 2022). An approach that can engage with the visual, the affective, the discursive, and practices is essential to a full analysis of the positivity complex.

In what follows we apply this approach to current examples of positivity imperatives addressed to women in the context of the pandemic. Before this, a brief note on the particularities of our analysis and the ambivalence of our position is needed. We are not concerned with pandemic positivity for its veracity, validity, or efficacy in making people feel better. Rather our interest is in the cultural and psychological work performed by the positivity instances we examine. Furthermore, while we are critical of such imperatives, we are not inured to their force and have found ourselves moved and affected by them. Indeed, it is precisely because such messages resonate so powerfully for many (including us) that we believe they require critical attention (see Orgad and Gill 2022). Crucially, that critique is targeted not at the individuals (journalists, coaches, and others) whose material we examine but, rather, at the circulation of these ideas, images, and structures of feeling. We ask: What ideas, images, and practices make up the positivity imperative? Why have they gained coherence and force at this particular time and across increasing sites of cultural life? Who do they address, and how do they call on subjects to act? Above all, how are such notions situated in relation to the cultural politics of neoliberalism and its increasing tendency to operate through the realm of the psychological?

Stylist Positivity Issue: Spread Joy, Not Germs!

Women's magazines are a prolific source of appeals to women to embrace positivity and boost their confidence and happiness across spheres of life, from intimate and sexual relationships, to body image, to workplace and parenting (Chen 2016; Favaro 2017; Gill and Orgad 2018). While print circulation of these magazines has been declining, the development of digital models to catapult the reach of brands has complemented print circulation and reinvigorated the sales of some titles (Favaro 2017; McIntosh 2017). *Stylist* is a UK women's magazine and one of the only major free-to-distribute magazines, with an average circulation (per issue) of 401,855 copies a month (ABC n.d.). It has a weekly digital edition and a monthly print edition, although during COVID-19 it stopped producing print copies and switched to an online-only model. The magazine is targeted primarily at twenty- to forty-year-old ABC1 women (the highest demographic classification used by the National

Readership Survey to classify readers in the UK) and describes itself as "featuring all of the latest lifestyle, fashion, beauty, travel, wellness & entertainment news, all through a feminist lens."[1] Its feminist spirit is signified by its familiar tagline, "For women who want more from their world," and its web headings, which include "strong women." Indeed, *Stylist* is an example of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018) par excellence, circulating and promoting ideas of female empowerment, confidence, agency, and self-esteem, largely through commodities and celebrities. The publication is also decidedly neoliberal in hailing a female subject who is "oriented to optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation" (Rottenberg 2014: 422).

In January 2021, as the UK was in its third national lockdown, and as infection and death rates hit record highs, *Stylist* published a special issue (no. 537) entitled "The Positivity Issue: Reasons to Stay Hopeful." On its cover (fig. 1) appears Glennon Doyle, the American "patron saint of female empowerment"[2] whose third self-help memoir, *Untamed* (2020), quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller. Doyle is in high heels, wearing an elegant white midriff-showing shirt and a pleated blue skirt, smiling confidently at the camera, arms akimbo and feet wide apart—the "Wonder Woman" power pose Harvard Business School social psychologist Amy Cuddy urges women to adopt, in her highly viewed Ted Talk "Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are" (61,754,101 views to date). Surrounding Doyle's image are blue graffiti-style affirmations and commandments such as "Be bold," "Stay human," "Ditch gratitude," "Transform," "Reject 'should,'" "Feel everything," and in bigger yellow font covering the lower part of her image the motivational assertion "we can do hard things." Below, a line in a smaller font reads: "Author Glennon Doyle transformed the lives of Adele and Oprah. Here's how she'll get us through 2021." On the one hand, the discursive and visual elements in this cover are familiar from, and build on, previous positivity exhortations, inspirational aphorisms, and confidence affirmations that circulate in contemporary culture (see Gill and Orgad 2015). The cover capitalizes on what Mehita Iqani (2012: 100) calls "the mode of glossiness," which is most familiar from hard-copy magazine covers and is intimately linked to consumerism. It creates a sense of luxury, success, desirability, and smoothness, which, crucially, is free of any holes, wrinkles, or blisters (91). At the same time, what is novel here is the juxtaposition of these visual and discursive elements of positivity against the grim context of the pandemic that is alluded to in the

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1 See www.stylist.co.uk.
2 https://www.amazon.co.uk/Untamed-Random-House-Large-Print/dp/059340047X

cover's grey background, the collective affirmation "we can do hard things," and especially the imperatives to "*stay* hopeful" and "*stay* human." They acknowledge, even if implicitly, that hope and joy are dwindling and hard to maintain, even for the magazine's middle-class readers. It is this juxtaposition, between acknowledging the heightened levels of distress and hardship characterizing the lives of women at this moment, and the imperative to stay happy, positive, and confident, that runs through the entire *Stylist* special issue, to which we turn our critical gaze.

<INSERT FIGURE 001>

The magazine's editor-in-chief Lisa Smosarski's opening letter titled "I'm Trying to Choose Positivity" vividly illustrates this juxtaposition. It starts by directly acknowledging the "flat" mood, the quashing of optimism by another lockdown, the miserable winter, and the consequent temptation "to slip under the bed." But as if in a movie scene where the heroine gets her act together and makes a U-turn, the editor then turns to listing the things she decided to do in order to refuse this temptation (which is framed as negative) and to give herself a sense of achievement, control, and calmness. For example, "I wash and dry my hair, even though nobody can see. I make myself wear clothes I might wear to the office." We recognize the force of these suggestions and the way they may help one feel better. But we also note their gendered particularities: there is no parallel in advice to men in the repeated injunctions to women to dress well, style hair, and apply makeup. It is striking how the pursuit of a polished femininity is marketed to cisgender women as a self-care strategy. Moreover, cementing a long-established link between women and consumer culture, almost the entire *Stylist* issue centers the consumption of products, many of which relate to body care, as a key (if not *the* key) practice through which to weather the crisis. Happiness and positivity affirmations are called forth through buying things: set up your at-home fitness club to "get strong in 2021"; "get ready for lift off" by purchasing "functional fragrances"; buy a rainbow necklace "to make your inner child smile"; purchase a positivity journal or "Happy Spoons and Spatulas." Perhaps most conspicuously, as women's economic security has been hit hard, with many losing their job and suffering huge financial penalties, for the modest sum of £925 *Stylist* advertises a Stella McCartney Smile jumper, which is "pure joy in fashion form." While there is nothing new about the promotion of such products as part of the positivity and happiness industry, here they are marketed directly as a kind of antidepressant for pandemic times. Even the otherwise dull product—an antibacterial multi-purpose cleaner—is marketed with the slogan "Spread joy. Not germs" (an ad for Method

anti-bac, all-purpose cleaner included in the *Stylist* issue), giving a new "positivity" twist to long-established constructions of white women as responsible for the physical, moral, and now emotional hygiene of the household.

Alongside buying products to care for one's body and home, *Stylist* exhorts women to care for themselves by regulating their feelings and mood. In recounting the survival/self-care techniques she adopted to "get her mojo back," Smosarski talks about outlawing complaint, "flat mood," and anger—dispositions deemed "negative" in women (Kay 2020). Thus she recounts her decision to mute "angry WhatsApp groups that only make me more tense." While recent times have been marked by an explosion of female rage (Orgad and Gill 2019) in the wake of racial and gendered protest movements, in this *Stylist* issue, as in other contemporary media, during the pandemic the opposite message seems to be foregrounded: contain, police, and mute your anger (see also Orgad 2019). While muting anger is cast as (and may indeed feel) beneficial in coping with the huge distress of the pandemic, it concurrently encourages the disavowal of the structural inequalities that underpin the uneven impacts of pandemic, directing women, instead, to turn inward and to invest in suppressing anger.

The *Stylist* "Positivity Issue" is replete with happiness and positive thinking mantras advocated by brands, happiness coaches ("a case of giggles is the medicine we all need"), yoga instructors ("how to find calm in chaos"), interior designers ("create a positive home and working environment"), travel writers, and other purveyors of the positivity complex. At the same time, it advocates messages that take potential criticisms into account and preempt them. "This is not about blind optimism or telling you to feel happy when you don't," Smosarski reassures her readers, in a typically reflexive move, designed to demonstrate the more sophisticated positivity being enjoined. In turn, the magazine strategically positions itself against the familiar mantras of "gratitude" directed at women today: "Ditch gratitude" reads one of the commandments on the issue's cover, a message Glennon Doyle expands on in her interview, explaining that the mandatory gratitude women have been exhorted to practice is geared "to keep us in our place." Rejecting gratitude is thus presented as a feminist rebellious act against patriarchal "indoctrination" (Doyle's words), especially since during the pandemic women have been constantly told to count their blessings. In yet another part of the interview, next to a photo of Doyle clutching her blue coat and staring with a big smile at the camera, Doyle urges women to "stop chasing" and "move past" happiness: "you are not supposed to be happy all the time," "don't fear failure," and "don't avoid the pain."

Elsewhere (Orgad and Gill 2022) we explore this seemingly contradictory move, whereby exhortations to happiness and confidence sit alongside calls to embrace vulnerability, failure, and pain. Yet in fact the two moves are mutually reinforcing: as Doyle explains, vulnerability and pain are "the fuel you'll burn to get your work done." In other words, women are allowed and even encouraged to express their vulnerability and unhappiness, but only briefly, as a means to reemerging defiant, empowered, and confident—just like Doyle's highly stylized photos that decorate the piece. Instead of being "obsessed with toxic positivity"—another reflexively self-critical concept used in the "Positivity Issue"— Doyle advocates a seemingly "radical" alternative: becoming "committed to feeling alive." Yet her interview and accompanying images, which perfectly match the visual motifs of the entire *Stylist* issue, offer a strikingly narrow definition for "commitment to feeling alive"—namely, being happy and confident and appearing beautiful by conventional heteronormative standards. The injunction to commit oneself to feeling alive seems particularly incongruous with the reality of extremely high rates of hospitalizations and deaths, when thousands of people, especially old people, poor people and Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, are literally struggling to stay healthy and alive. This exposes the assumptions of class privilege that shape the entire content of the magazine. Furthermore, *Stylist*'s issue represents a particularly striking development and mutation of positivity discourses in such a way as to make them appear more "radical," highlighting both the dynamism and flexibility of positivity imperatives, in a manner redolent of the appropriation of Audre Lorde's writings about self-care and "radical vulnerability."

Stylist thus illustrates a curious paradox: on the one hand, it is situated as a direct response to the pandemic and its devastating effect on women, collectively; "ultimately, 2020 pulled the rug out from under us" writes Alix Walker, who interviews Doyle. Furthermore, the magazine seemingly critiques "old" and "toxic" positivity and gratitude messages. Yet at the same time, *Stylist*'s "Positivity Issue" falls back into, authorizes, and amplifies precisely the individualistic psychologized imperative to transform and upgrade oneself into a confident, happy subject. At a moment when the structural aspects of the crisis are highly visible, it hails women as individuals, with psychologized forms of address and injunctions to adopt positivity as a solution.

Pandemic Coaching: From Sepia to Bold

Even before the pandemic, life coaching was a booming global industry with numerous coaches, practices, and training enterprises. Intimately connected to the bourgeoning wellness industry, which has been spearheaded by largely white, young, female, and economically privileged social media influencers (O'Neill 2020a), life and career confidence coaches are part of a new stratum of "everyday experts of subjectivity" (Binkley 2007: 372). They facilitate and encourage the systematic remaking of individuals into self-governing subjects who practice self-care (Ouellette 2016). Working to overcome their confidence deficit is one of these self-care practices which has become an unquestioned commonsensical obligation for women (Gill and Orgad 2015; Orgad and Gill 2022).

COVID-19 has constituted a strikingly fertile ground for the popularization and fortification of exhortations to women to build and boost their confidence. Confidence coaches addressing women have gained significant visibility and authority as cultural intermediaries who respond to and in turn mobilize women's experiences and feelings in the wake of the pandemic's devastating impact.

Gosia Syta is among many UK-based life and career coaches. She defines her role as a "Personal Impact Expert helping women from male-dominated industries develop their leadership presence and step into bigger roles."[3] Her Walk Your Talk website[4] and LinkedIn account are the main sites of her online work. Addressing primarily women in professional jobs, Gosia's visibility on social media materializes in a range of activities: from confidence-building workshops through posts in which she shares her experience as a way of inspiring other women to overcome their insecurities, to memes with inspirational aphorisms and affirmations, to visual posts promoting her business. While she has been working in the confidence coaching space since 2016, during the pandemic there has been a notable spike in Gosia's social media activity. As the pandemic continues to wreak havoc on women's economic security, mental health, and safety, Gosia's work of mediating between her consumers and the confidence cult(ure) has taken on both new volume and new forms. In particular, her LinkedIn activity has been dominated by a flurry of visual memes based on photos in which Gosia uses her body, often in conspicuously dramatized poses and bright colors, to exemplify and reinforce the imperative to upgrade oneself into a confident subject.

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3 This is how Gosia Syta requested to be presented. It is also how she describes herself on her LinkedIn profile.

4 See www.timetowalkyourtalk.com.

For example, in a post from October 2020, Gosia appears climbing out of what seems to be the London Dungeon (a tourist attraction, which recreates various gory and macabre historical events), gazing at the viewer from below. The caption reads: "Have you thought how you would like to emerge from the pandemic?" (fig. 2). In the text accompanying the image Gosia offers her answer:

> Lockdown felt like a collective midlife crisis. Everyone suddenly had a lot of time on their hands[5] to reevaluate their lives—past and present. And ask themselves some fundamental questions. Such as:
>
> "What's the meaning of life?"
>
> "What's my true purpose?" and
>
> "What's the point of high heels when I can go to my client meetings in slippers?"
>
> Welcome to the club. At 48, I've been a member of it for quite some time.
>
> These days, after many lockdown restrictions have been lifted, I find myself thinking:
>
> "How do I want to emerge from this pandemic?"
>
> And I slowly begin to get the idea: I want to emerge more influential than before.
>
> I want to reach more women with my personal impact training. I want to teach them how to project more confidence, speak with authority, and influence with their voice.
>
> I want to show them how to go from invisible to impossible to ignore.
>
> Have you asked yourself this question? And if so, what is the answer?

<INSERT FIGURE 002>

Like many similar messages circulating during COVID, the pandemic is cast here as an opportunity for the individual: a chance to reevaluate, an opportunity for personal growth. COVID-19 is reframed from a collective crisis to a chance for individual women to undergo a transformation and emerge empowered, more confident, and more influential. Against

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[5] Clearly this observation does not apply to many people, and especially women, who due to increased caring commitments had far less rather than more time during the pandemic.

women's increased unpaid care and domestic load at home and worsening mental health, Gosia promises women a complete makeover "from invisible to impossible to ignore."

This idea is reiterated in a series of memes, in which Gosia capitalizes on the before/after makeover visual format of a split screen, casting herself in the role of the woman who transforms "from beige to bold" (fig. 3), refusing to "tone it down" and working instead to "boost it up" (fig. 4). The desired transformation is signified by the visual shift from sepia to bright colors: a symbolic makeover from the dull, "low-resolution" depressing state—characterizing the way many people have been feeling throughout the pandemic—to a colorful, vibrant, optimistic, and forward-looking mode. The memes tell the female viewer: you, and you alone, can make the image on the left a thing of the past (just like old sepia photos) and transform yourself into the kind of brighter, glossier, confident, and full-of-hope subject on the right.

<INSERT FIGURE 003>

<INSERT FIGURE 004>

Like Pierre Bourdieu's (1984: 365) "cultural intermediaries," Gosia offers herself as a "role model" and "guarantor." She embodies, literally (using her body) and symbolically, both the cultural producer and the ideal consumer (Smith Maguire and Matthews 2010: 408), who buys not only the coaching services/products but also an entire "art of living" (Bourdieu 1984: 366), namely, confidence and positivity.

The visual is the central register through which the work of mediating the confidence cult(ure) occurs here, with Gosia appropriating what Kirsten Kohrs and Rosalind Gill (2021) call "confident appearing": a visual style evident in contemporary advertising's construction of women, which involves stock features such as head held high, face turned forward, and eyes meeting the gaze of the viewer and looking directly back at them. When women are pictured alone, Kohrs and Gill found, smiling is rare, and sometimes the gaze has an almost defiant aspect. This is vividly exemplified by another image Gosia posted in November 2020, to facilitate discussion about women's anger and promote her Personal Impact Incubator (fig. 5):

<INSERT FIGURE 005>

Gosia stands in the same Amy Cuddy–recommended "Wonder Woman" pose in which Doyle is pictured on the *Stylist* cover. Her defiant image belongs to a now familiar set of images of

"popular feminism" (Banet-Weiser 2018) in contemporary Anglophone culture, highlighting female independence, power, and capacity.

As we have shown in relation to *Stylist*, what is most striking about these images and the texts that anchor their meaning is how they speak to and work with women's experience during the crises precipitated by COVID-19. For example, the post accompanying the image of "angry" Gosia (image 4) starts with the following:

> Let's talk about anger in women.
>
> It's not something people like to see.
>
> Even when anger is a justified reaction to injustice, unfairness, or wrongdoing.

The text alludes to the crucial context outside the image's highly staged and aestheticized contours, namely, systemic injustice and inequality suffered by women. The pandemic has given visibility to the structural conditions that hit women, and especially poor women and women of color, the hardest: the burden of increased unpaid care and domestic loads at home, disproportionate experience of redundancy and job loss, huge financial penalties, increased levels of violence against women and BAME communities,[6] and a devastating mental health crisis. Indeed, a significant part of the affective force of Gosia's angry image and its message derives precisely from its female readers' potential identification with these injustices. Gosia herself acknowledges the profound structural inequalities underpinning women's lives. For example, she continuously reposts articles and comments on the dire impact of the pandemic on women and the onslaught on women's rights globally. Nevertheless, the solutions she advocates are commonly figured not in terms of systemic change but rather through individual work on the self. For example, the "Have you thought how you would like to emerge from the pandemic?" post includes a passing mention of the lockdown, comparing it to a "collective midlife crisis." Yet this "nod to injustice" is then mobilized to promote an individualized program based on emotional, psychological, physical, and behavioral work women are required to perform in order to "emerge" from the crisis as more confident and influential subjects.

This dual move—in which collective and systemic injustice is acknowledged but is concurrently disavowed by proposing individualized one-size-fits-all techniques to better the

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[6] Alternatives to the contested term *BAME* are being discussed, including "racially minoritized," "people of color," and the employment of greater specificity for talking about ethnicities and heritages.

self—was vividly demonstrated in online workshops Gosia ran during the pandemic. Like many coaches and companies responding to the shift to working from home, Gosia developed a set of tools aimed at helping her clients "project confidence, credibility and competence" in meetings when using video conferencing technologies. At her "virtually confident" workshop, which one of us attended late at night in the height of the pandemic, Gosia explained how people tend to touch their faces while participating in Zoom or Teams or Skype calls. This "feminine touch" (which Goffman famously identified in advertisements in the 1970s and argued signified narcissism) is a sign of lack of confidence, Gosia asserted. "We touch our faces because it's a way of calming ourselves down," she explained. "This is what our mum did to us when we were children." Gosia conveyed her empathetic understanding that people are more anxious during COVID-19 times, and that having to continuously appear on-screen exacerbates existing anxieties. Yet this recognition—which seemed to strike a chord with the workshop participants—was then used to advocate a single and seemingly simple solution: stop touching yourself! Rather than a subject who comforts herself or, worse, demands being comforted and supported by others—and crucially by employers, governments, and those in power—the desirable feminine subject that is conjured up is that who denies her anxiety and eschews its disclosure at all costs. Rather than encouraging action to challenge and transform the structural conditions that create and exacerbate women's anxieties, what is promoted here is the erasure of any sign of women's legitimate vulnerability (signified by touching), which, like so many other affective responses in women, is deemed ugly, problematic, and damaging for women's success.

The denial of "negative" feelings in women is further reinforced by Gosia's humorous and cheerful self-presentation across her coaching activities: from a video in which she sings in a somewhat self-ridiculing manner "Ms. Cellophane" (a witty twist on the original "Mr. Cellophane") to discuss how women make themselves invisible at work; to a self-portrait in which she jokingly suggests she looks like a serial killer, which she uses to explain how to improve the way women look on-screen during meetings; to the staged photos we discussed earlier. While humor can, of course, be a helpful tool to cope with adversity and pain, as a cultural intermediary who continuously embodies cheerfulness and humor, Gosia demonstrates that the female subject who survives and thrives needs not only be confident, positive, and resilient but also funny and able to balance her concern with "serious" stuff like inequality with playfulness and laughter.

All this is not to say that Gosia's work is not animated by a genuine concern and deep care for gender equality. Unlike the *Stylist*-commodified exhortations to women to "spread joy" and "do hard things," which are largely divorced of recognition of women's profound pain and its structural underpinnings, Gosia's work acknowledges this in important ways. Her work is also profoundly personal, using her own intimate experiences, body, and subjective dispositions to help other women. However, we sought to highlight how this very commitment to tackling gender inequality in times of a global crisis is translated into encouraging women to work on their selves—their feelings, their thinking, their bodies and behavior—to "emerge" from the pandemic as confident and positive subjects.

Conclusion

In this article we examined two case studies to explore how positivity imperatives in contemporary culture call forth a happy, confident, hopeful, and vibrant subject during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on women's magazines and lifestyle coaching, we have shown that these positivity imperatives are not just verbal or textual. They are also visual and can be seen in distinctive constructions, such as confidence poses or the transformation from sepia to bold; they are affective, materializing as exhortations to feel differently, for example, "get your mojo back" and "feel alive"; and they offer a huge variety of embodied practices for generating self-worth and self-esteem, including different ways of speaking, writing, dressing, and using and holding one's body. We have shown how these positivity imperatives, which have gained growing visibility and popularity in the last decade or so, have mobilized and channeled women's experiences and feelings in particular ways in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we demonstrated how the positivity complex and what we call confidence cult(ure) (Gill and Orgad 2015) mobilize a set of dispositions, qualities, and feelings designed to enable individuals to not simply survive but also thrive and "feel alive" in times of a global pandemic, which has affected women disproportionally.

Our analysis contributes to existing debates on the neoliberalization of self-help and its distinct gendered character, and the growing critical interest in self-care and its permeation across domains of life and contexts. Previous literature has highlighted the congruence and intimate alliance between the rise of neoliberalism and the growth and appeal of the happiness and confidence industry (Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Davies 2015; Gill and Orgad 2018; Orgad and Gill 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic (and its convergence with

the resurgence of Black Lives Matter) presents a moment that could, as many have hoped, significantly challenge the existing neoliberal order. We hear more and more calls to refuse racial and patriarchal capitalism, to build a "caring economy" (Care Collective 2020; WBG 2020), and to harness "negative" feelings such as anger to promote those urgent societal changes. Yet our analysis suggests that the multiple crises exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have also furnished a fertile ground for the fortification and expansion of positivity and confidence imperatives. Indeed, the fundamental paradox we have highlighted in this article is that in a moment when structural injustices and inequalities—particularly those related to gender, race, class, and disability—have been made ever more visible, positivity and individualized self-care interpellations to women flourish, anger is muted, and critiques of structural inequality are largely silenced.

As we were writing this article, the UK has been over a month into its third lockdown. Despite our profound privilege, like so many others in this country and around the globe, we have felt exhausted, stressed, anxious, and isolated. We kept receiving through our mailboxes and apps endless positivity messages of the kind we discussed in this article. We truly wanted these to work. As Jennifer Silva (2013) notes, under neoliberalism, managing emotions—and we would add our thoughts, bodies, and behavior—rather than the precariousness and inequality underpinning our society—seems to be (or is presented as) the only solution to our pain. Yet we found ourselves again and again failed, disappointed, and cheated by this seductive solution. Some positivity imperatives may have had a fleeting "feel good" effect, but they fundamentally failed to address the conditions that produced and maintained our exhaustion, anxiety, and pain. They could not, indeed they cannot, get us unstuck.

For Ahmed (2014: 16), "getting unstuck" has a radical potential to challenge our investment in certain objects and emotions and reorient our relations to cultural ideals. Getting unstuck, she writes, means disinvesting in the promise of happiness and its related "sticky" emotions. Yet as we have shown, in the current moment of the convergence of the pandemic and neoliberalism, getting unstuck has itself become the sticky mantra de jour; an affective project animated by and in turn buttressing a neoliberal imaginary, with its focus on individualization, psychologization, responsibilization of the self, and the muting of anger about social injustice.

Acknowledgments

We are very grateful to Gosia Syta for giving us permission to use images and content from her LinkedIn account.

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