

## **Media Visibility of Femininity and Care: UK Women’s Magazines’ Representations of Female “Keyworkers” During COVID-19**

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This article explores the media visibility of female keyworkers—workers deemed essential for society’s functioning, including medical staff, transport workers, and social care workers—during COVID-19. Focusing on UK women’s magazines as an important genre regulating femininity, we analyze representations of female keyworkers during the pandemic’s first six months, demonstrating how these depictions and the construction of keyworkers’ femininity gesture toward “care justice” while simultaneously buttressing sentimentalized “care gratitude.” “Care justice” is articulated through a focus on women’s ordinariness, collectivity, and the voicing of critique regarding working conditions and the urgent need to invest in care infrastructure. “Care gratitude” is promoted through the magazines’ celebration of “heroic” keyworkers who are overwhelmingly young, able, employed, resilient, and caring, reinforcing heteronormative femininity. Women’s magazines thus constitute a mediated site where both the possibilities and the limitations of the recent media visibility of care work and those performing it are illuminated.

*Keywords: women’s magazines, COVID-19, women keyworkers, femininity, care gratitude, care justice*

In March 2020, the British government ordered an unprecedented national lockdown because of the outbreak of COVID-19. Yet, even as most people were told in no uncertain terms to remain at home, workers whose labor was deemed essential for society’s day-to-day functioning were required to carry on traveling to their workplaces. These “essential workers,” “frontline workers,” or “keyworkers,” as they were frequently referred to, included medical staff, supermarket and transport workers, cleaners, garbage collectors, and those caring for the elderly and the disabled.

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In the UK and elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic has constituted a rare moment in which these largely taken-for-granted, often invisible and poorly paid workers were rendered visible and recognized as vital to the “care infrastructure” that keeps society functioning (Bergfeld & Farris, 2020; Fraser, 2016). In contrast with the limited interest that the media have historically taken in these workers and in sharp contrast with their portrayals as “ineffectual fools and/or monsters” (Grist & Jennings, 2020, p. 39), during COVID-19 these workers received considerable media attention and were valorized as “heroes” (Cox, 2020; Wood & Skeggs, 2020). In the UK, public displays of gratitude for keyworkers ranged from weekly “clap for carers” during the first lockdown, through countless positive news stories (Bagnasco, Catania, Gallagher, & Morley, 2020, p. 902; Stokes-Parish, Elliott, Rolls, & Massey, 2020), to the proliferation of homemade posters thanking “frontline heroes” in public and private spaces across the country (Wood & Skeggs, 2020).

COVID-19 can thus be said to have thrown into sharp relief society’s dependence on care and social reproductive labor—which has historically been perceived as women’s work and predominantly performed by women (Federici, 2012; Oakley, 1974). In the UK, for instance, education and child, health, and social care—sectors in which physical as well as emotional caring for others is central—are overrepresented by women (81% and 79%, respectively). The majority of these keyworkers is white (86%),<sup>2</sup> with 14% belonging to ethnic minorities, including Black/African, Asian, mixed and other (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, 58% of all those defined as keyworkers during the pandemic in the UK have been women (ONS, 2020).

The notable visibility of keyworkers during COVID-19’s first months and the dramatic exposure of society’s dependence on their labor and services seem to have largely mobilized what Wood and Skeggs (2020) term “care gratitude”: heartfelt displays of appreciation for “frontline heroes.” To date, however, this gratitude has failed to translate into “care justice,” namely, anger and/or concrete demands for substantive material change. The diverse and often creative ways in which the public conveyed their gratitude to keyworkers have not, in other words, led to a concerted demand for better pay and working conditions for these “heroes”; nor has this care gratitude ultimately strengthened calls for an end to the ongoing financialization of the UK’s care infrastructure or to the increasing pressures on the National Health Service (NHS). Moreover, as Cox (2020) observes, drawing on evidence from the SARS epidemic, narratives that depict care workers as heroes can prove politically convenient for deflecting attention away from governmental mismanagement and accountability.

In this article, we explore how representations of female keyworkers during COVID-19 play a part in and/or contribute to challenging a sentimentalized “care gratitude” narrative. How do these depictions help promote “care justice” and display anger at the state’s devaluing of care and social reproductive labor? How do constructions of these workers’ femininity feed into narratives of care during the pandemic, and what can this tell us more broadly about the media visibility of care work? While both male and female keyworkers have played crucial roles during the pandemic, we focus on the visibility of female keyworkers for two main reasons. First, as mentioned above, many keyworker sectors are highly feminized and there has been a stubborn association of care and social reproductive labor with women. Second, we are interested

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, we capitalize Black but not white. Differing from APA style, this is a deliberate choice. See: <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php>

in how the visibility of female keyworkers is situated in contemporary culture's embrace of (certain versions of) feminism, where women's rage is receiving "an extraordinarily new visibility" (Kay, 2019, p. 591).

Addressing the above questions is, of course, an enormous task, particularly given the sheer volume of mediated representations of female keyworkers since the outbreak of COVID-19. Existing studies have begun highlighting the remarkable visibility and overwhelmingly positive depictions of these workers in the news (Bagnasco et al., 2020; De Camargo & Whiley, 2020; Hamad, 2020; Stokes-Parish et al., 2020). In this article, we focus on a different genre that, to date, has not been examined in this context: women's magazines in the UK. As we discuss below, the genre of women's magazines has historically—and almost exclusively—foregrounded very particular ideals of middle-class femininity, womanhood, and care work, while excluding images of ordinary working-class or lower-middle-class women carrying out mundane and "unglamorous" *paid* labor. Thus, the appearance of female keyworkers in contemporary women's magazines merits critical attention. This is particularly true given that such visibility is situated in the current conjuncture of an intensifying care crisis, a pandemic, and the increasing visibility of popular and neoliberal feminism. In the UK, these factors are compounded by years of austerity measures alongside a thriving women's magazine industry that continues to attract readership and has historically been an important site of cultural reference. Drawing on scholarship on women's magazines (Duffy, 2013; Favaro, 2017; Ferguson, 1983; McRobbie, 1996, 2020; Winship, 1987), we argue that women's magazines continue to be a central popular culture site of meaning making and boundary marking (McRobbie, 2020), especially in times of crisis. While it is true that the print circulation of women's magazines has been declining, the development of digital models has complemented print circulation and reinvigorated some titles' sales (Duffy, 2013; Favaro, 2017).

The remainder of the article is divided into four sections. We first situate our analysis in relation to critical scholarship on the shifts in representations of femininity, women, work, and care in the media, and in women's magazines in particular, in the context of the popularization and neoliberalization of feminism in the West. Next, we present our methods. We then move to the empirical heart of the article, where we analyze a sample of UK women's magazine covers and articles that displayed female keyworkers during the first six months of COVID-19. The analysis is divided into two subsections. First, we show how contemporary representations challenge the care gratitude narrative to a degree and disrupt historical representations of femininity in women's magazines. Second, we discuss how contemporary magazines' representations of keyworkers simultaneously reinforce borders of normative femininity and how this ultimately serves to bolster care gratitude rather than a demand for care justice. The conclusion draws together the threads of the argument, suggesting that although the care gratitude narrative seems to be reinforced, femininity, feminism, and care exist in potentially productive tensions in contemporary women's magazines. We also briefly address the question of what, if any, the longer-term effects of the increased media visibility of keyworkers have been, two years since the start of the pandemic in the UK.

### **Changing Representations of Women, Work, and Femininity: Media and Women's Magazines**

Women's magazines have historically been a central genre in constructing and regulating normative femininity (Ferguson, 1983; McRobbie, 1996; Ritchie, Hawkins, Phillips, & Kleinberg, 2016). Earlier feminist critiques highlighted magazines' and media's endorsement of what Betty Friedan famously called the

"feminine mystique" and the promotion of middle-class femininity in the service of patriarchal consumer culture. However, from the 1980s, news media and women's magazines have moved from depictions of women as exclusively or even predominantly housewives, mothers, and carers to celebrating the new sexual contract (McRobbie, 2009). News media portrayals reflected the increasingly active and visible roles of middle-class and elite women in public life (Magor, 2006), celebrating the "new woman" who successfully combines motherhood and career, desires to work outside the home on an equal basis and alongside men, and spends her income frivolously (McRobbie, 2020; Summers, Eikhof, & Carter, 2014). At the same time, news and popular media, including women's magazines, have continued to present unpaid care work as women's work and to idealize traditional "feminine roles" such as carers and mothers (Barnett, 2006; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Sullivan, 2015). Furthermore, portrayals of working-class women remain relatively rare. When these women are depicted in news media, they are often pathologized and distanced from idealized normative femininity (Lawler, 2000; Magor, 2006).

The increased media visibility of middle-class and high-power working women since the 1980s has gone hand in hand with women's magazines' increased appropriation of feminist issues, including sexual liberation (Le Masurier, 2016), childcare provision and equal pay (Ferguson, 1983), and women's health (Hinnat, 2016). However, the incorporation of feminist language (Zhao, 2013, as cited in Favaro, 2017) and the celebration of feminist heroines (McRobbie, 2020) have been closely tied to contemporary culture's promotion of a "postfeminist sensibility" (Gill, 2007) and, more recently, the rise of popular and neoliberal feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018). These versions of feminism are characterized by an emphasis on individualized and psychologized self-governance and self-surveillance (Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017), while exhorting women to endlessly work on themselves to boost their confidence and resilience, often through consumption (Chen, 2016; Favaro, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2015). Women's magazines' endorsement of popular feminism is also manifest in a growing trend of "embracing diversity" whereby magazines' visual representations have expanded to include people of different sizes and body shapes (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2020). Yet this kind of diversity often fails to recognize the meaning and material significance of difference and prohibits display of "anger about past exclusions" (McRobbie, 2020, p. 57).

The entry of feminism into women's magazines has, thus, on the one hand, contributed to popularizing *some* feminist ideas and to troubling the "tighter constraints of normative femininity" (McRobbie, 1996, p. 187). On the other hand, women's magazines continue to recite relatively narrow versions of normative middle-class femininity and to endorse notions of freedom, empowerment, and independence that are largely individualized, psychologized, and tied to lifestyle and consumption, consequently deflecting attention from and evacuating demands for structural change and equality (Budgeon & Currie, 1995; McRobbie, 2009). Building on this scholarship, we understand contemporary UK women's magazines as a significant site in which normative femininity continues to be articulated, regulated, and negotiated, offering readers instructive "technologies" demarcating and policing the boundaries of gender, class, and ethnicity (McRobbie, 2020, p. 29).

### Method

We initially encountered and were rather surprised by *Vogue's* July 2020 special issue's three covers, which featured a train driver, a midwife, and a supermarket assistant. We subsequently became

interested in exploring whether this was an exception or whether there were similar examples in other magazines. We therefore conducted a search in leading UK women's magazines, using the search terms "keyworker" and/or "essential workers" and/or "frontline workers" and/or "NHS workers" from March 2020 to August 2020—the first six months of the pandemic in the UK. The search yielded eight features with a total of 29 different profiles of keyworkers, which were published in the UK editions of *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Marie Claire*, *Glamour*, and *Hello!*, some of the most widely read UK women's magazines.<sup>3</sup> While eight might seem a small number, most of these magazines are published monthly and our time frame was a six-month period. We conducted a close textual and visual analysis of each text, informed by the research questions discussed earlier. The selected examples are by no means representative, nor is our aim to provide a detailed textual analysis of each. Rather, we use them as illustrative examples that demonstrate how women's magazines' constructions of female keyworkers negotiate certain notions of femininity and narratives of care that concurrently shift away from and help buttress different aspects of neoliberal feminism.

### **Expanding the Borders of Femininity and Gesturing Toward Care Justice**

#### ***Celebrating "Ordinary" Women Across Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Labor***

At the start of the pandemic in the UK, *Glamour* dedicated two separate issues to celebrating female keyworkers. The first, published in March 2020, featured the profiles of nine NHS employees. Framed as a deliberate departure from the magazine's "normal" and normalizing patterns, the issue's introduction reads:

At GLAMOUR we're accustomed to seeing celebrities and public figures grace the covers of magazines. But for our latest cover, we wanted to take the opportunity to acknowledge and show gratitude to the NHS.

It's a nod of appreciation to the people who work tirelessly day in, day out to keep us safe and healthy (Joseph, 2020, para. 2).

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<sup>3</sup> The most recent data available from Statista refer to sales of women's lifestyle magazines in the UK in 2018–2019, indicating that the nine most read magazines are: *Yours*, *Woman & Home*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Prima*, *Red*, *Vogue*, *Hello!*, and *Elle UK*. Searching these magazines, we found four relevant representations in *Vogue*, *Hello!*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Elle UK*, which we included in our sample. We then added *Grazia*, *Marie Claire*, *Glamour*, and *Harper's Bazaar*—popular magazines that have embraced feminism (see, e.g., Favaro & Gill, 2018; Feasey, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2018). This search yielded four articles (two from *Glamour*, one from *Harper's Bazaar*, and another from *Marie Claire*), which we added to the sample, resulting in a total of eight features: Alexander (2020), Chappet (2020), Elle UK (2020), Gulla (2020), Hello! (2020), Joseph (2020), Marks (2020), and McCollum (2020).



**Figure 1. Glamour cover (Joseph, 2020).**

Indeed, all articles in our sample include representations that do not normally appear in women's magazines. While women's magazines have been part of the media's "demotic turn" (Turner, 2010), as *Glamour's* text cited above admits, the genre—especially the magazine cover—has remained heavily centered on the *extraordinary*, in the form of celebrity and/or famous women. As Iqani (2012) cogently observes, "intimately linked to consumerism," the glossy magazine cover "creates a sense of luxury, success, desirability, and smoothness, which, crucially, is free of any holes, wrinkles, or blisters" (p. 91). This "mode of glossiness" is usually achieved through the representation of female celebrities whose faces and bodies are carefully stylized to mask imperfections and vulnerabilities and accentuate a particular notion of beauty (Iqani, 2012, p. 100). And while "real" people with unembellished faces have been increasingly included in women's magazines, they remain a tiny minority on magazine covers (Iqani, 2012).

By contrast, the representations in our sample focus on women, many of whom are working class or lower middle class, whose appearances do *not* conform with the highly glamorous standards dominating women's magazines, especially their covers. Most of the photographed women are dressed in their work uniforms, with work lanyards hanging from their necks, their hair natural, and wearing little to no makeup, in what seems like relatively unstaged shots from their working lives (Figure 1).

In April 2020, *Glamour* produced a similar Special Section, dedicated to "the amazing women who are still at work for us" (Chappet, 2020). This time, the profiles include a secondary school teacher, owners of a local café, a gas engineer, a supermarket cashier, an operational leader at Thames Water, and a postwoman. Most of the profiles are accompanied by amateur photos of the women at work; for example, the gas engineer fixing a boiler or the teacher in the teachers' meeting room. Similarly, the *Elle* issue includes a story titled "The Other Front Line," featuring women who, as the piece states, "we see every day" (Elle UK, 2020, para. 2), while the *Harper's Bazaar* article features a COVID-19 ward cleaner, a midwife, a critical care nurse, and a family doctor wearing a headscarf. Visually and discursively, the emphasis is on

these women's "ordinariness." As *Vogue's* article featuring three female keyworkers underscores, "As our nation perseveres against COVID-19, we find ourselves leaning . . . on *ordinary* people" (Marks, 2020, para. 2; emphasis added).

The emphasis on ordinariness is further enhanced by the magazines' presentation of women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and the conscious decision to include women who perform diverse forms of paid care and social reproductive work that constitute part of the "care infrastructure" enabling society's day-to-day functioning. Perhaps the most striking example is the *Vogue* issue mentioned earlier, which dedicated three separate covers to the faces of different female keyworkers: a train driver, a midwife, and a supermarket assistant. Shot by *Vogue's* professional photographer, these "ordinary" women's faces occupy the entire page in the same way that celebrity faces normally do. The text emphasizes that the women featured are just three of the "millions of people in the UK who, at the height of the pandemic, and in the face of danger, put on their uniforms and went to work" (Marks, 2020, para. 1). Notably, two of the three women are said to come from minority ethnic backgrounds, and each works within a different sector.

Thus, while working-class women have been systematically excluded from and denigrated in women's magazines and the media more broadly (De Benedictis, Allen, & Jensen, 2017; McRobbie, 2020), in magazine issues published during the early phase of the pandemic, these women are celebrated, and there is a certain recalibration of the social and cultural value of the often low-paid work they perform. In contrast with women's magazines' (and media's) promotion of "neoliberal leadership-feminism" (McRobbie, 2020, p. 56) and its ideal feminine figures who occupy leadership or high-powered positions, most of the keyworkers portrayed here deviate from this ideal. Their stories do not directly promote consumption or individual lifestyles. They present "femininities" across a more diverse spectrum of class, ethnicity, race, and labor, and they highlight the value of paid social reproductive and care work. Furthermore, these keyworkers' depictions deviate from the idealized (i.e., white, professional, and individualized) woman of neoliberal feminism in two other important ways: (a) their focus on collectivity and community and (b) their acknowledgment of pain and inequality.

### ***Highlighting Collectivity, Community, and Solidarity***

Iqani (2012) notes that the genre of consumer magazines—particularly magazine covers—plays a fundamental role in the discursive construction of the individualist values of contemporary neoliberalism. However, in a striking departure from magazines' and media's common focus on individual and successful women, in our sample there is a notable repetition of the importance of *collectivity*. Not only are none of the displayed faces celebrities', but their presentation also often highlights that these women are part of a *collective*. This is manifest in the repeated use of the gallery format in the features and covers, and by recurrent textual references to the collective "we" and to solidarity and community, chiming with the "we're all in this together" mantra that circulated in the first months of the pandemic (Sobande, 2019, p. 1034).

*Elle's* issue is a typical example. Similar to the *Glamour* issue discussed above, it features a group of seven keyworkers, six of whom are pictured side by side at the top of the article's front page (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. *Elle* cover (*Elle UK*, 2020).**

The accompanying stories foreground themes of solidarity and community support. For example, Georgia Hayman, a customer service supervisor for the London Underground, describes how the doctors and nurses traveling on the underground acknowledge the important jobs that transport workers are doing. Similarly, Angela Fernandez, a community kitchen manager, states: “The community is really pulling together” (*Elle UK*, 2020, para. 62).

Just a few months later, in July 2020, *Vogue* published the special issue mentioned earlier, with three keyworkers celebrated on its covers and in its pages. Even though *Vogue’s* rendition is less collective in its presentation, it is notably a trio collection of covers, and the keyworkers’ portraits follow a very similar script of community and solidarity to the one that predominates in the *Elle* and *Glamour* stories. For example, Narguis Horsford, a Black British train driver, describes how she has witnessed “a tremendous amount of community spirit” (Marks, 2020, para. 8) while white midwife Rachel Millar recounts “the community support and kindness that [she’s] seen over the past few months” (Marks, 2020, para. 13). Indeed, these accounts highlight women’s commitment to and celebration of community and mutual support.

Interestingly, solidarity and compassion are invoked most often in relation to the community within which these women live or work. This diverges quite markedly from the usual individualizing and entrepreneurial messages of magazines and neoliberal feminism more generally. While appeals to ideas of being “in it together” can serve to obscure inequality (Sobande, 2019, p. 1036), in the magazine examples we examined, these emphases, we suggest, seem to open up a different “care imagination” (Chatzidakis, Littler, Rottenberg, & Segal, 2020), one that foregrounds collective structures of support and “shifts away from the individualized, competitive, and monetized frameworks that have tried to ease out responsibility and compassion” (Wood & Skeggs, 2020, p. 645). In so doing, these magazines’ depictions of female workers move, however partially, beyond mere recognition and gratitude for care, gesturing toward a narrative of care justice, in which community bonds and solidarity are central.

### ***Acknowledging Pain, Distress, and Inequality***

Another important aspect of the magazines' gesturing toward care justice is the space they allow for expressions of distress, anger, and pain with some—however limited—references to structural issues. Women's magazines have largely been the genre of "feel good" feminism *par excellence*, sublimating and eliding anger and structural critique, promoting, instead, happiness and positivity (Chen, 2016; Favaro, 2017; Favaro & Gill, 2019). While expressions of personal struggles and adversity appear in women's magazines, the emphasis is often "on the harnessing of individual resources to overcome precarity rather than on challenging the conditions that created precarity and inequality in the first place" (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 484).

The representations we examined diverge—again, to some extent—from this affective regime and a sentimentalized "care gratitude." Almost every woman featured in our sample confesses to feeling anxious and scared. For example, Emily Deely, a customer experience manager at Sainsbury's supermarket featured in the *Elle* article, admits: "I have bad days, naturally, and there are moments at home alone when I've cried" (*Elle* UK, 2020, para. 52). Anisa Omar, featured in the *Vogue* article, who works as a supermarket assistant, similarly admits to being anxious about going to work, while the trainee supervisor at yet another supermarket, Izzy, talks about her physical and emotional exhaustion (*Cosmopolitan*).

However, perhaps the most striking example is *Marie Claire* UK's article (McCollum, 2020) titled "I'm a key worker on the brink of homelessness." Fronted with an image of a young Black woman bare of makeup, with head tilted and an expression of distress, fatigue, but also determination, the caption underneath the image reads:

There are 7.1 million keyworkers in the UK risking their lives every day, yet many are barely earning enough to keep a roof over their heads. Wendy, a care worker living in a hostel with her 11-year-old, explains how the system has let her down (McCollum, 2020, image caption).

This framing is significant in two ways. First, from the outset, it situates the individual story within the broader—and dire—reality of keyworkers in the UK, particularly their working conditions and paltry pay. Second, it places the responsibility on the government and state, thus resisting the figure of the heroic individual female keyworker mobilized to help mute and deflect state responsibility (Cox, 2020). Written in the first person, the *Marie Claire* article recounts the harrowing story of Wendy, a Jamaican migrant and single mother working as a carer for sick young people. She describes how she has not been able to make ends meet since fleeing from her violent ex-husband seven years previously, and how she was evicted from her home and has been living in an overcrowded hostel provided by her local housing association where she shares a broken bed with her daughter. Wendy concludes with a call for action: "The government needs to do more to put keyworkers in affordable, long-term accommodation where they can be comfortable. I won't stop fighting until we can all get out of this nightmare situation" (McCollum, 2020, para. 11).

In this way, the *Marie Claire* portrayal challenges the "feminine incarceration" effect, where poor women, already constrained by their material circumstances, become visible in popular culture in denigrating

and stereotypical ways (McRobbie, 2020, p. 101). Rather, the article highlights the sacrifices made by a poor Black single mother working as a carer for vulnerable people. The article underscores the institutional and state violence to which she has been subjected and the devastating effects this has had on her and her daughter's health and well-being. Furthermore, it crucially situates Wendy's story within the broader context of systemic injustice experienced by other women in similar situations and ends with a demand for structural change in the form of government subsidized affordable housing.

In all of these ways, the representations of keyworkers in women's magazines in the first six months of COVID-19 seem to disrupt and expand the borders of normative femininity to which the genre has been so strongly attached. They portray a diversity of women in terms of class, ethnicity, and race, as well as the kind of work they do. All the women are in paid work, and many of the jobs they perform, which have historically been invisible, are recognized as important and worthy. These workers' visual and textual portrayals highlight the importance of community and solidarity. Finally, the representations also seem to refuse, at least to a degree, the sentimentalized heroic narrative where women are portrayed as simply working for the good of others without any rancor or anger. Thus, the magazines' representations of keyworkers diverge from contemporary ideals of normative white heterosexual middle-class femininity and disrupt a simple care gratitude narrative, gesturing, instead, toward care justice, demanding recognition regarding the value of care work while highlighting the urgency of material change. Yet, as we explore in the following section, even within these different and, to some extent, disruptive representations, boundary marking practices of normative femininity persist.

### **Securing the Borders of Femininity and Cementing Care Gratitude**

#### ***Young, Able, Caring, and Employed***

Of the 29 different profiles in our sample, all the women are young or relatively young with the oldest being in her late 40s/early 50s. In the *Glamour* special issue of NHS workers, for example, all nine profiles are of women 24–32. This is particularly striking given that the average age of NHS staff is 43.7 and is projected to rise to 47 by 2023 (Royal College of Nursing, 2012). Similarly, the *Vogue* cover includes a 24-year-old midwife, a 21-year-old supermarket assistant, and a train driver whose age is not mentioned but whose flawless face suggests she is probably in her 40s. Recognition seems to be conditioned on being young or at least not yet visibly middle-aged, consistent with the historical invisibility of aging femininity (Dolan & Tincknell, 2012; Segal, 2014). Furthermore, as far as one can tell from images, all the female workers whose representations appear in our sample are able-bodied and their accompanying texts do not report their having any form of disability.

Importantly, despite the kind of visibility bestowed on these keyworkers as well as the value ascribed to the labor they perform, this recognition does not ultimately disrupt the historic association between care work and femininity. The emphases on caretaking, empathy, and self-abnegation—which manifests clearly in many of the women's rejections of the term "hero," and their insistence on their desire to help others—become some of the crucial boundary-marking technologies in the construction of these keyworkers, ensuring they are demarcated within the borders of a "properly" caring femininity.

References to caring are made repeatedly. This is especially striking in examples where the women are doing work that has historically been coded as “masculine” or performed almost exclusively by men—like engineering and directing funeral homes. For instance, 34-year-old British Gas engineer Sheena Anker (*Glamour*) tells how she organized a collection of food for hospital workers, while funeral director Hannah Lane reflects on the considerable time she spent reassuring and comforting bereaved families (*Elle*). The emphasis on caring can also be found in some of the other stories where the women are not working in the social care sector. For example, café owners Hannah and Colleen Day-Jarvis (*Glamour*) explain how they looked after their elderly customers by delivering groceries. Similarly, supermarket manager Emily Deeley (*Elle*) recounts how she “stretched herself” during the pandemic by starting a delivery company that sends chocolate to people across the country. Even though Emily’s and the café owners’ companies are clearly commercial initiatives—which, like so many other business owners, they launched during the pandemic to keep afloat—they are presented as if they were not-for-profit charitable activities motivated purely by a sense of caring and commitment to the community and the vulnerable. In this way, the linkage of care, helping others, and femininity is naturalized, even as care work is rendered more visible and valued and some displays of distress, anxiety, and even anger are allowed.

Finally, a notable condition for inclusion in the magazines is paid employment. As mentioned, all the featured women are in waged work, even as some constitute the working poor, like Wendy in *Marie Claire*. Against a sobering background of a pandemic where millions of women lost their jobs or were forced to substantially scale down, and when women’s financial and job security has drastically deteriorated, the women featured in our sample represent the opposite. As McRobbie (2020) observes, within the contemporary media landscape, women’s “active participation in the labor market grants them recognition and respectability even when the work they do is low paid, temporary, and possibly on zero-hours contracts” (p. 97). Indeed, we argue that it is partly *because* of their being positioned in the paid workforce that these women are granted recognition and admiration within these magazine pages. Conspicuously absent from these pages are the women who lost their jobs or were forced to go on furlough or reduce their working hours, or who had to perform more unpaid care and domestic labor because of school and nursery closures. In this way, the glorification of these keyworkers works to bolster what McRobbie (2020) calls the antiwelfare imaginary of the contemporary popular media landscape, precisely during a crisis when welfare is even more urgently needed. By rendering usually invisible female workers visible and showering them with public appreciation while largely shying away from demands for structural change, the magazines contribute to “care gratitude” rather than “care justice.”

### ***Heteronormative Aesthetics, Care, and Consumption***

The representations in our sample are (relatively) racially and ethnically diverse, reflecting both the significant proportion of women of color in keyworker sectors and the trend toward embracing “diversity” in popular culture in general, and women’s magazines in particular. At the same time, most of these representations subscribe to heteronormative aesthetics: Most women featured have slim to average-size bodies and are often smiling. Indeed, women’s appearance plays a key role in “approving” their respectability: Only two profiles—of a postwoman in *Glamour* and the supermarket supervisor trainee in *Cosmopolitan*—are not accompanied by photos.

The emphasis on visual appearance—and on an aesthetically acceptable and pleasing appearance—is arguably most conspicuous in the *Vogue* edition, which presents the faces of three keyworkers rather than celebrity faces. While, as we discussed earlier, this represents a departure from magazines' convention, it simultaneously replicates some of the conventional aesthetic codes and styles of magazine covers, which work to perpetuate "the cult of femininity" (Ferguson, 1983). Although representing "ordinary" women, two of the three keyworkers on the *Vogue* cover appear in close-up reminiscent of those of celebrities appearing on these covers. For example, Narguis Horsford is presented as larger than life, with flawless skin and (what appears to be) nearly imperceptible makeup that gives her lips a slight sheen. The camera angle, shot from below, is dramatic, and Narguis's gaze, which is outside the picture frame, helps suffuse the entire frame with an aura of grandeur (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. *Vogue's* cover featuring Narguis Horsford (Marks, 2020).**

In a similar fashion, the *Harper's Bazaar* article is framed from the outset as an *aesthetic* celebration of NHS workers.

"Rankin is best known for photographing celebrities including Kate Moss, David Bowie, and Emma Watson," the opening paragraph reads, "but this spring he undertook a very different project. As a small token of appreciation for the work of NHS staff across the country during the pandemic, the photographer decided he wanted to turn his lens onto the individuals behind our health service" (Alexander, 2020, para. 1).

Not only do the profiles of the 12 NHS workers include aestheticized photographs shot by Rankin, but each is also accompanied by his comments on their appearance and his experience of photographing them. For example, Rankin writes how midwife Claudia “was so nervous about having her picture taken, despite being so photogenic,” and describes critical care worker Emma as “a beautiful person inside and out” (Alexander, 2020, Profile 5, para. 9). Even in *Elle*’s story, where the women’s images are less imposing and clearly attempt to capture their “authentic” ordinariness, the images are still stylized and curated. The photographed keyworkers are all captured in black and white and are in similar poses, looking directly at the camera, though none is smiling. There is, we suggest, a pleasing aesthetic quality to these images that works to reinforce a nonthreatening affective mood and what Kanai (2019) calls relatability.

Despite the perpetuation of a heteronormative aesthetic, it is important to reiterate that these articles *do* offer alternative understandings of value, moving from a focus on material, consumerist, and more fleeting aesthetic pleasures to valuing care, community, and collective support. In this sense, they celebrate a different notion of ideal womanhood: one that is predicated on doing paid work that *visibly* facilitates the survival and well-being of society rather than the capacity to spend income frivolously and actively participate in consumer culture. Thus, while the stubborn link of women and care and social reproductive work is reinforced, there is simultaneously a recalibration of its status.

Yet even as most of the stories and images of keyworkers are not associated directly with brands and products, they occasionally do reinforce, albeit in subtle ways, the association of the feminine with the purchase of certain products. The clearest example in our sample is the *Hello!* article. Unlike the other examples, where the recognition given to female keyworkers is constructed as valid on its own terms—justified by the significant roles they have performed during the pandemic—in the *Hello!* article the keyworkers are introduced in the context of a £100,000 prize the magazine offers to a keyworker for her wedding. “HELLO! is delighted to announce the winning couple—and the bride- and groom-to-be, who both work for the NHS, could not be more deserving” (Hello!, 2020, para. 1), the article’s opening states. That “deserving” wedding, the article explains, is a “fairytale wedding at the Rosewood London hotel” (Hello!, 2020, para. 6): a typical venue for middle-class wedding celebrations. Indeed, one of the main functions of this article is the promotion and idealization of the “wedding spectacle” (Kay, Kennedy, & Wood, 2019). The prize is sponsored by the magazine and a wedding specialist company. The article thus functions as an explicit advertisement for this company and a list of “30 luxury suppliers” involved in the production of the couple’s wedding whose details are included at the end of the piece (Hello!, 2020, para. 17).

What is more, the image at the top of the article’s page shows Sarah, the keyworker, who is a white, conventionally beautiful mother in her early 30s. It is a photo of a heteronormative family with familiar markers of middle-class feminine respectability: Sarah is pictured on a garden bench in a private home with her husband-to-be on one side and a blonde boy we are told is her biological child on the other. Her blonde hair falls on her shoulder, and she wears a white sleeveless top and a floral miniskirt. She is smiling broadly, and both her son’s and partner’s hands are placed on her knees. The *Hello!* feature thus works to secure the boundaries of heteronormative femininity.

### ***Resilience and Positivity***

Although the representations of female keyworkers in our sample do allow for more expressions of distress, anger, and pain, these expressions tend to be recuperated by endorsements of resilience. For example, 28-year-old teacher Daniella Doherty confesses that she has days when she really struggles, but she adds that she knows that “that is totally normal” (Chappet, 2020, para. 6). Similarly, 30-year-old pharmacist Janky Raja confesses to feeling “an element of nervousness,” but she continues, “I think that is only natural” (Chappet, 2020, para. 27). All the articles in our sample include similar comments on difficulties and struggles, yet these negative feelings are quite frequently muted by a positive can-do spirit. This move, of acknowledging struggle and pain only to quickly disavow it by naturalizing or repudiating it altogether, is characteristic of contemporary confidence and resilience imperatives, which are especially addressed to women (Orgad & Gill, 2022).

Strikingly absent from most of these accounts is any critique of the organizations for which the women work or the government. In a typical example, pharmacist Janky Raya (*Glamour*) mentions times when the Boots stores where she worked were short-staffed, but rather than critiquing this, she exemplifies the self-responsibilizing neoliberal subject, saying, “but we are doing all we can to support each other” (Chappet, 2020, para. 25). Izzy, the supermarket supervisor trainee cited in *Cosmopolitan*, describes in moving detail how quickly the shelves were emptied, how supplies dwindled, and how she had to tell “people they [couldn’t] bring food home to their children.” But she, too, ultimately glosses over her frustration by insisting that “times are hard, for everyone” and concludes with: “It’s moving to see supermarket staff being more appreciated now . . . .We finally feel like we’re valued” (Gulla, 2020, paras. 16, 17).

This transmutation of women’s negative feelings into positive affect is often actively solicited by the magazines, for example, through the questions they ask the women to comment upon. In the *Glamour* issue, for instance, the journalist asks women questions such as: “How are you looking after your well-being during this time and that of your family?” “What positives do you think you will take away from this experience?” and “If you could give the UK general public one piece of advice right now, what would it be?” These questions direct the respondents to focus on self-care and wellness, to draw on positivity discourses of resilience and positivity, and to position themselves as self-responsibilized advisers to the public. For example, echoing the “progressive” neoliberal feminist ideal of the “balanced woman” (Rottenberg, 2018), Dr. Ashton-Edwards (*Glamour*) recounts how she tries to “compartmentalize to achieve balance” between her demanding day job and her personal family life and concludes by urging the magazine’s readers: “Rediscover what makes you happy and what you have to be thankful for” (Joseph, 2020, para. 25). Other featured women in this and other magazines similarly foreground ideas of gratitude, resilience, adapting to change, and self-care as the desirable (feminine *and* feminist) responses to the current crisis.

In this respect, *Marie Claire’s* representation of Wendy, the care worker discussed earlier, is an outlier. Unlike most of the other magazines’ representations of keyworkers championing resilience, positivity, and self-responsibility, Wendy’s story highlights the state’s carelessness. She talks about feeling degraded, unsafe, and unable to care for her daughter and herself. She concludes with a demand that the government address the issue of affordable housing. Interestingly, Wendy is one of the two women (the other being Izzy, in *Cosmopolitan*) whose profiles are featured in our sample, whose full name is not disclosed. The reason for her

partial anonymity may well be the need to protect herself and her daughter. Yet it is nevertheless telling that the only woman who does not—indeed cannot—embrace resilience and self-care is a woman of color who is not represented by a full name (first and surname). In most of the other examples in our sample, struggle, pain, and critique are articulated, but nearly always alongside expressions of gratitude, positivity, and resilience—a move that cements the contemporary borders of normative femininity and neoliberal subjectivity.

### Conclusion

Focusing on women's magazines' depictions of female keyworkers, in this article we have explored how the boundaries of normative femininity have been negotiated, expanded, and demarcated anew during the first six months of COVID-19, a period of crisis, and how the construction of femininity has been entangled with narratives of care. On the one hand, the visibility of female keyworkers in women's magazines during COVID-19—including nurses, supermarket cashiers and train drivers—constitutes a noteworthy departure from the genre's normative regimes of representation and from the broader representational paradigm of neoliberal feminism. Their visual and textual constructions highlight ordinariness, diversity, community, and, crucially, "negative" affects including pain and anger, emotions that have been systematically deemed ugly and "unfeminine." Magazines' representations of female keyworkers thus diverge from dominant ideals of white heteronormative middle-class femininity, even as they remain confined to, and in turn reinforce, an overall "feel good" message of care gratitude that evades serious critique of structural injustice and the "careless state" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). These representations also signal a shift away from individualized, consumerist, and neoliberal feminist frameworks toward different (if not entirely counter) versions of femininities that allow for what Wood and Skeggs (2020) call "socialized emotions—those which can illuminate . . . the injustice that hides behind the rhetoric of the 'heroic' frontline in the face of a global pandemic" (p. 645). There is also, importantly, a revaluing of care and social reproductive work. In particular, as we have seen in examples such as the *Marie Claire* article about a keyworker on the brink of homelessness, such representations expose the dire conditions of many keyworkers—so many of whom are women—and as such can help mobilize not merely the symbolic valuing of care but also and crucially demands for a "caring politics" and the material investment needed to realize such a politics (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).

On the other hand, messages of "care justice" remain circumscribed by the magazines' boundary-marking practices that continue to reinforce heteronormative femininity and the association of women with care, which, in turn, help buttress a sentimental care gratitude narrative. This is manifest in the persistent glorification of keyworkers who are mostly young, slim to average-size able bodied, employed, resilient, positive, and caring.

Furthermore, magazines' constructions of keyworkers and their femininities serve to bolster a narrative where care is still gendered and where poor working conditions for keyworkers, many of whom are women, may be noted but only marginally challenged. This framing also reinforces the link between work and respectability, which is part of the antiwelfare agenda. Yet our analysis demonstrates how *both* narratives of care alongside differing and more expansive notions of femininity can be coarticulated within a popular culture site such as magazines, concurrently pushing against, expanding, and policing boundaries. Thus, women's magazines are a potentially more complex mediated site than scholars have claimed in the

past decade. Paraphrasing McRobbie (1999), our analysis suggests that femininity and care, and indeed femininity and feminism, exist as and in productive tensions in contemporary women's magazines (p. 55).

That said, the longer-term impacts of the shifts identified in our study remain unclear. More than two years after the start of the pandemic in the UK, not only has care gratitude failed (at least to date) to translate into substantial changes, such as improving keyworkers' employment conditions (De Camargo & Whiley, 2020), but expressions of care gratitude themselves also seem to have largely subsided. A cursory look at women's magazines in the first two months of 2022 suggests that keyworkers no longer decorate their covers or feature centrally, indeed, if they feature at all—a trend that appears to characterize news media more broadly. Thus, the heightened visibility of keyworkers in the first months of the pandemic in women's magazines, and in the media more broadly, functioned in similar ways to what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls a "flashpoint". That is, the representations of keyworkers may have highlighted the significance and value of care work and ignited a public response in the form of care gratitude, but they concurrently helped obscure the very issues they were aiming to illuminate. What is more, at the time of writing, the flame they ignited seems to have died out. We therefore conclude on a somewhat pessimistic note, echoing Gray's (2013) question about visibility as a form of power: "Will seeing more frequently and recognizing more clearly and complexly members of excluded and subordinate populations increase their social, political, and economic access to life chances?" (p. 773). Will increased media visibility lead to the political will to address structural injustice and inequality? The answer to these questions, to date, is no. Mediated appreciation for care and reproductive work and the celebration of the people—most of whom are women—who perform it, have not been commensurate with material improvements in their working conditions and pay, nor, for that matter, with a serious and sustained political commitment to properly resource and prioritize care.

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