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Get unstuck! Pandemic positivity imperatives and self-care for women

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).

Who's in need of some love right now? (Advert for florist home delivery)

Be kind to your self- with extra soft nightwear and calming homeware (Promotional email from department store)

Do you need a negativity detox? (Events magazine)

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 27th 2021

Introduction

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 & 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 devastating impact of the virus; associated states of emergency and lockdown; economic crises, rising unemployment and poverty; and the widespread grief, distress and mental health challenges produced in its wake. Many societies, including the UK, became awash with a "new sentimentalism" characterised by multiplying discourses of hope, gratitude and resilience, seen vividly in the examples above which represent only a small proportion of similar messages received *on just one day* while writing this article.

"Staying positive" and practising "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 lives 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 academic and journalistic research has 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 (Kay and Wood 2020; Sobande 2019). We are indebted to, and 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 their emphasis upon being happy, kind, positive and mindful. Our aim in this paper 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 indeed benign.

Our focus here 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 night clubs 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 almost daily publication of reports detailing crises among particular groups (for example children, young people, keyworkers), spiralling 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 characterise 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 keyworkers in health, social care and retail sectors (Scott 2020); the uneven effects of redundancies and furloughs which mean that they hit women disproportionately (Andrew et al. 2020); the closure of schools and nurseries and the dramatically unequal impact of home-schooling 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 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 evident, documented and widely reported in media, women are so insistently interpellated with individualistic, psychologised forms of address.

The remainder of the paper 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 wider scholarly engagements with happiness, public mood and positive psychology. We

then set out our approach, some notes of caution, and the questions we address. Sections four and five are the empirical heart of the paper taking as its focus two cases studies from among the proliferating injunctions to women to be positive, to weather the crisis, and to 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 upon developing new social practices from holding one's body differently, to keeping gratitude journals, to cultivating a new virtual persona for work meetings on Zoom and other platforms. 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 work 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 which have changed under the influence of feminism, neoliberalism and social media cultures. McGee argues that self-help has become an increasingly individualistic enterprise. Indeed, we

4

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. A related argument is made by Sarah Riley et al. (2019: 9) arguing 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" (Riley et al. 2019: 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 it 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)

Another notable 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 is no longer confined to books or articles but has spread out to include a vast lifestyle media whose purpose is to entertain us while offering up different models of living and to inspire self-transformation (Ouellette 2016). Reality TV shows, makeover programmes, celebrity culture and a multiplicity of social media influencers are part of this shift, which is regarded by many as exemplifying "soft forms of power" that are every bit as 'effective in changing social attitudes' (Hall, Massey, and Rustin 2015) as more obvious forms of control or governance. It is not only that self-help is traversing different media but also that it *changes* in the process. New hybrids are emerging as self-help blurs with novels, memoirs, comedy, and fictional performances that are drawn on intertextually. More and more, these shifts and remediations make it complicated to draw firm boundaries around self -help.

This dynamic has been cemented and accelerated during the Covid-19 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." As we discuss elsewhere (Gill and Orgad forthcoming), this marks an extension and intensification of the diffusion of therapeutic notions across the polity (Illouz 2008): we are witnessing the development a *self-care society*. Such a diffusion of self-care messages offers a glimpse of the levels of distress and pain that exist currently during the pandemic and lockdown, while also re-routing solutions back through an individualized and psychologized circuit.

New technologies are further augmenting this – particularly the proliferating self-care apps that are available to download on our smartphones. The visibility and prominence of these apps have increased dramatically during the Covid-19 crisis, offering individual programmes of support to people facing intolerable strains – in the absence of anything like adequate psychological or public health services, or indeed funding to support basic needs such as food, heating and winter clothing. Evidence from the pandemic shows how self-care apps were particularly targeted at women, and disproportionately at women of colour, through their roles as teachers, nurses, carers and retail staff. In the UK high street retailer Tesco gave its 420,000 (majority female) employees free access to meditation app *Headspace*, and mental health platform *SilverCloud* (ACG 2020). Meanwhile, *Headspace Premium* was offered free of charge to millions of key or essential workers including teachers and support staff in US, UK, Canada and Australia, and to all health staff in the US and UK (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, largely driven 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 a change and 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 have also been understood as part of wider trends related to happiness, wellness, and mindfulness. The huge growth and reach of positive psychology over the past two decades are central to this (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 wellbeing, resilience and flourishing. This programmatic reinvention is based upon 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 paper (but see Binkley, 2015; Cabanas and Illouz 2019), however our key observation is to highlight the continuity between this new scientific discipline or 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 wellbeing of not just individuals but 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. Will Davies (2015) identifies a "happiness industry" and Carl Cederstrom 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 has 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 behavioural "nudging"

(Barker 2018; Davies 2018; Zuboff 2019) – an issue that urgently requires further critical study.

A concern with the role played by the positivity imperatives in relation to the market and capitalism more broadly also informs critical engagements. A decade ago, Barbara Ehrenreich (2010: 8) wrote that "positive thinking… has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy." Increasing empirical studies now evidence this claim. For example, Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn (2015) show that in Britain's welfare system a new form of "deserving poor" are compelled not only to endlessly and actively "seek work," but more perniciously, are required to demonstrate a *"positive" attitude* in order to be eligible for payments. Other work looks at how "resilience" is also mobilised against the poorest and most vulnerable in society, in individualizing and self-blaming strategies that seek to denigrate single mothers, disabled people and the lowest paid (Bottrell 2013; Jensen 2016).

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 here is not in neoliberalism as a macro economic or political rationality but rather as a quotidian sensibility that has become a kind of hegemonic common sense. Indeed, we go further than this in focusing on the "psychic life of neoliberalism" (Scharff 2016) or the way that neoliberal culture requires subjects who work on having the "right" characters and dispositions in order to survive and thrive – this includes being confident, resilient and positive. 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). We situate our work in a broad governmentality tradition

8

which sees contemporary injunctions to positivity as 'implicated in a more general logic of neoliberal subjectification' (Binkley 2011:372) part of the spread of the (positive) "psy complex" (Rose 1990).

Much research has highlighted the "calculating" and "entrepreneurial" nature of the subjectivity incited by neoliberalism. However, our critique pushes beyond overly rationalised accounts. On the one hand, we highlight fractures and contradictions – in order 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; we note that happiness imperatives are also accompanied by particularly heightened visibilities of distress (see also Franssen 2020; Thelandersson 2020). On the other we are also interested in the affective dimensions of neoliberalism – the way its injunctions work not only by attempting to shape thought or behaviour, 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

The approach we use to illuminate contemporary self-care and positivity imperatives during the Covid crisis is an affective-discursive one (Wetherell, 2015). Margaret Wetherell has offered a thoroughly social re-reading of affect. It rejects the idea that affect is a "pre-personal and extra-discursive force hitting and shaping bodies" (2015: 143) and argues that affect is social, patterned and implicated in power relations. Importantly this makes it 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 these dispositions is not limited to words; it is, as Rachel O'Neill (2020b: 628) has recently put 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). These practices include different ways of speaking, of writing, of dressing, of holding one's body. They are called forth in physical exercises, in affirmations of self-worth, in injunctions to be one's own friend, in cautions against perfectionism, in gratitude diaries, and self-coaching. Thus, an approach that can engage with the visual, the affective, the discursive and with practices is essential to a full analysis of the positivity complex.

In what follows we apply this approach to some current examples of positivity imperatives addressed to women in the context of the pandemic. Before we do so, a brief note on the particularities of our analysis and the ambivalence of our position is needed. First, we are not concerned with pandemic positivity for its veracity, validity or efficacy in making people feel better. Our interest is not in the truth or otherwise of the instances we study, but rather in the cultural and psychological work they *do.* 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). But that critique is targeted not at the individuals (journalists, coaches and others) whose material we examine here 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, 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.[1] It has a weekly digital edition and a monthly print edition, although during the Covid-19 pandemic, it stopped producing print copies and switched to an online-only model. The magazine is targeted primarily at 20 to 40 years 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" (www.stylist.co.uk). 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, celebrities and underpinned by a corporate logic. 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 a month into its third national lockdown, and as infection and death rates hit record high, *Stylist* published a special issue (no 537) entitled "The Positivity Issue: Reasons to Stay Hopeful." On its cover (Image 1) appears Glennon Doyle, the American "patron saint of female empowerment"[2] whose third self-help 2020 memoir, *Untamed*, quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller. Doyle is in high heels, wearing an elegant white midriff-showing shirt and a pleated blue skirt, staring smilingly and 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" (60,225,878 views to date). Surrounding Doyle's image on the cover 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 it says "we can do hard things." Below this motivational assertion, 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 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 (Iqani 2012: 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 in the cover's grey background, in the collective affirmation "we can do hard things" and especially the imperatives to "*stay* hopeful" and "*stay* human", which acknowledge, even if implicitly, that hope and joy are dwindling and hard to maintain, even for the middle-class readership of the magazine. 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.

Image 1. *Stylist* Positivity Issue cover, January 2021

The magazine's editor-in-chief Lisa Somosarski's opening letter "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 clearly framed as negative) and make her feel good, give herself a sense of achievement, control and calmness. Many of the self-care acts Somosarski describes are, as Riley et al. (2019) have observed, related to body appearance and consumption. For example, Somosarski writes, "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 to 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, apply make-up. 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 centres 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. Affirmations to happiness and positivity are called forth directly 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 "Happy Spoons and Spatulas" and a positivity journal "helping girls and women to celebrate their worth." 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 amount 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 kind of "anti-depressants" for the 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, it would seem, *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 in order to "get her mojo back," Smosarski talks about outlawing in herself complaint, "flat mood" and anger –those dispositions deemed 'negative' in women (Kay 2020). Most striking is 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 movements such as Black Lives Matter, MeToo, and TimesUp, 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). As Stanley Cohen (2001: 195) puts it in a different context, "this is just what the individual spirit of the global market wants to encourage…

The message is: get real, wise up and toughen up; the lesson is that nothing, nothing after all, can be done about problems like these." Whilst muting anger is cast as (and can 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. *Stylist* exaltation of women to mute anger is part of a wider culture that encourages "women to deny the injurious structural forms of inequality that have affected their lives so deeply, and to bury their anger and indignation" (Orgad 2019: 198).

While the 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, *Stylist* advocates messages which at the same time take potential criticisms into account and pre-empt 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 positions itself *against* the familiar mantras of "gratitude" directed at women today: "Ditch gratitude" reads one of the commandments on the special 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 we have been constantly told to count our blessings. In yet another part of the interview, next to a photo of Doyle clutching her blue coat and staring at the camera with a huge smile that exposes her bright teeth, 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 those to embracing vulnerability, failure and pain. Yet as we argued there, and as vividly manifest in *Stylist*, 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 re-emerging 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 visual appearance, which perfectly match the visual motifs of the entire *Stylist* issue, offer a strikingly narrow definition for "commitment to feeling alive"—namely being happy, confident, and appearing beautiful by conventional heteronormative standards. The exhortation to commit oneself to *feeling* alive seems particularly problematic (perhaps even disturbing) against the reality of extremely high rates of hospitalization and death, when thousands of people, especially poor people and BAME communities, are literally struggling to *stay* healthy and alive. This underscores 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 (see Orgad and Gill forthcoming, for a discussion of this in relation to the uptake and appropriation of Audre Lorde's writings about self-care and "radical vulnerability").

Stylist thus illustrates a curious paradox: one 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 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 types of 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). Various studies have shown that these new experts "mediate becoming", facilitating and encouraging the systematic remaking of individuals into self-governing subjects, "as the agents of their destinies, who achieve goals of health, happiness, productivity, security and wellbeing through their individual choices and self-care practices" (Ouellette 2016: 77). For women, working on their self-confidence is one of these self-care practices. As we have shown elsewhere (Gill and Orgad 2015; Orgad and Gill 2022), working to overcome their confidence deficit is, today, a kind of unquestioned commonsensical obligation for women. Covid-19 has constituted a strikingly fertile ground for the popularization and fortification of exhortations to women to build and boost their confidence. In particular, confidence coaches addressing women have gained significant visibility and authority. They are cultural intermediaries who respond to and in turn mobilize women's experiences and feelings in the wake of the pandemic's devastating impact on women's economic security and mental health.

Gosia Syta is one among many UK-based life and career coaches, who 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 website Walk Your Talk (https://www.timetowalkyourtalk.com), and her account on the professional and employment-oriented platform LinkedIn are the main sites for 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 frequently shares her experience as a way of inspiring other women to overcome their insecurities, to memes with inspirational aphorisms and affirmations, to many visual posts she produces to promote her business. While she has been working in the confidence

coaching space since 2016, during the Covid-19 pandemic there has been a notable spike in Gosia's social media activity, especially on LinkedIn.

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. Her LinkedIn activity for instance 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 colours, to exemplify and reinforce the imperative to upgrade oneself into a confident subject.

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?" (Image 2). In the text accompanying the image Gosia repeats the question and offers her own answer:

> Lockdown felt like a collective midlife crisis. Everyone suddenly had a lot of time on their hands to re-evaluate 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.
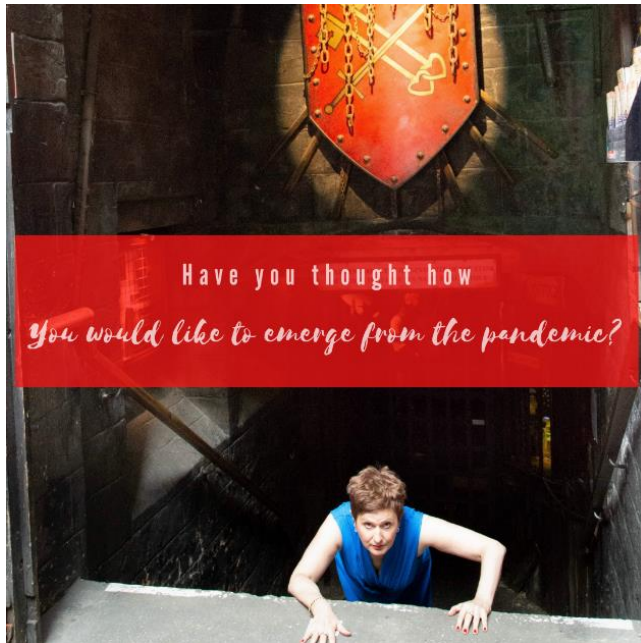> Have you asked yourself this question? And if so, what is the answer?

Image 2. "Have you thought how you would like to emerge from the pandemic?" posted by Gosia Syta on LinkedIn. Photograph courtesy Carolyn Gindein IWOM001 Photography.

Like numerous other messages circulating during Covid, the pandemic is here cast as an opportunity for the individual: a chance to re-evaluate, an opportunity for personal growth. The pandemic is reframed from a collective crisis to a *chance for women* –individually – to undergo a transformation and emerge more empowered, more confident, and more influential. School closures, healthcare systems stretched to breaking points, and social distancing measures have increased many women's unpaid care and domestic load at home. Women are increasingly been pushed into the invisible space of the home, dubbed by some as an alarming "return to the 1950s." Against these dire conditions, 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 (familiar from advertising), casting herself in the role of the woman who transforms "from beige to bold" (Image 3), refusing to "tone it down" and working instead to "boost it up" (Image 4). The desired transformation is signified by the visual shift from sepia to brightly colours: a symbolic makeover from the dull, "low-resolution" depressing state – characterizing the way so many people have been

feeling throughout the pandemic – to a colourful, 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.

Image 3. "From beige to bold," posted by Gosia Syta on LinkedIn. Photograph courtesy Carolyn Gindein IWOM001 Photography.
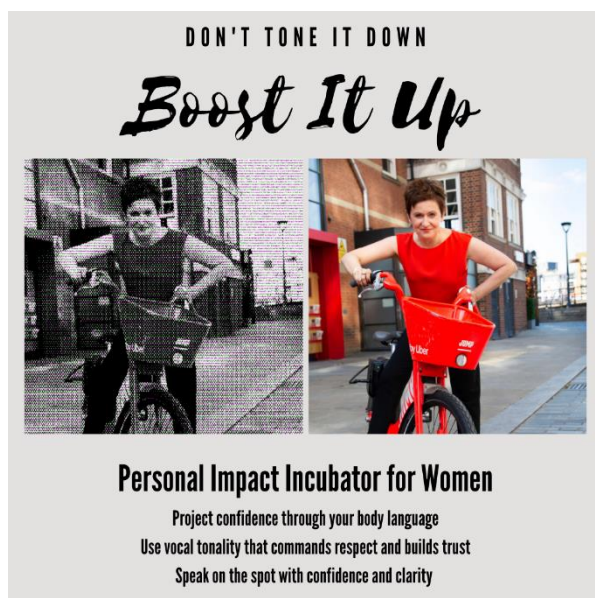

Image 4. "Don't tone it down, Boost it up," posted by Gosia Syta on LinkedIn. Photograph courtesy Carolyn Gindein IWOM001 Photography.

Like Bourdieu's "cultural intermediaries" Gosia offers herself as a "role model" and guarantor" (1984: 365). She embodies, both literally (using her body) and symbolically, the cultural producer and her own ideal consumer (Smith Maguire and Matthews 2010: 408), who buys not only the coaching services/products but 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 Kohrs and Gill (2021) call "confident appearing": a visual style evident in contemporary advertising's construction of women, which involves a number of 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. These visual motifs are anchored by linguistic elements, which highlight female independence, empowerment and entitlement. This is vividly exemplified by another image posted by Gosia in November 2020, meant to facilitate discussion about women's anger and promote her Personal Impact Incubator (Image 5):

Image 5. "Let's talk about anger in women," posted by Gosia Syta on LinkedIn. Photograph courtesy Carolyn Gindein IWOM001 Photography.

Gosia stands in exactly the same "Wonder Woman" pose in which Doyle is pictured on the *Stylist* cover, and which social psychologist Amy Cuddy, in her extremely popular Ted Talk about power poses encourages women to adopt as a strategy "before you go into the next

stressful evaluative situation."[4] More generally, Gosia's defiant image belongs to a now familiar set of images of "popular feminism" (Banet-Weiser 2018) in contemporary Anglophone culture, that has been developed to convey messages about female autonomy, 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 – both directly and indirectly –women's experience during the crises precipitated by Covid-19. For example, the post accompanying the image of "angry" Gosia (Image 4), starts with:

> 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; 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' recognition of and identification with the injustices of the current crisis. It is important to also note that Gosia herself acknowledges the profound structural inequalities underpinning women's lives. In parallel to her original posts, she continuously reposts articles about and comments on the dire impact of the pandemic on women and the onslaught on women's rights globally. However, at the same time, the solutions or ways forward she advocates as a confidence coach are commonly figured not in terms of systemic change but rather 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 and compares it to a "collective midlife crisis." Yet this "nod to injustice" is then mobilized to promote an individualized programme based on emotional, psychological, physical and behavioral work women are required to perform in order to "emerge" from the crisis as more confident subjects.

This dual move – in which collective and systemic injustice is acknowledged but is concurrently being disavowed by proposing individualized one-size-fits-all techniques to better the self– was vividly demonstrated in one of the online workshops that Gosia ran during the pandemic. Like many coaches and companies responding to the shift to working from home and people's profound dependence on video conferencing technologies, Gosia developed a set of tools for her female clients to deploy both during and beyond the pandemic. These were aimed at helping them "project confidence, credibility and competence" online. At her "virtually confident" workshop, which one of us attended, late at night in the height of the pandemic, Gosia explained how women 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 was depicted as purposeless and 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 recognition that people are more anxious during Covid-19 times, and that having to continuously appear on screen exacerbates these already intense anxieties. She clearly cares deeply about helping women during this devastating crisis. 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 women's anxiety, what is promoted here is the erasure of any sign of women's legitimate anxiety (signified by touching), which like so many other affective responses in women is deemed ugly, problematic and to have a damaging and negative impact on women's success.

The denial of "negative" feelings in women is further reinforced by Gosia's humourous and cheerful self-presentation across her coaching activities and appearances: 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 admits looking 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 humour can, of course, be a helpful tool to cope with adversity and pain, as a cultural intermediary who continuously embodies cheerfulness and humour, Gosia demonstrates that the female subject who survives and thrives, needs not only be confident, positive and resilient, but also funny, and one who knows how 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 care for gender equality. Quite the contrary. 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, insecurity and their structural underpinnings, Gosia's work acknowledges this in important ways. Her work is also deeply personal, using her own intimate experiences, body and subjective dispositions to help other women. However, what we sought to highlight is 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 behaviour – in order to "emerge" from the pandemic as confident and positive subjects. Yet the structures of inequality that animate Gosia's mediated work are largely lost in their translation into confidence coaching.

Conclusion

In this paper we examined two case studies to explore how positivity imperatives for women call forth a happy, confident, hopeful and vibrant subject into being in contemporary media culture 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 visual constructions, such as confidence poses or the transformation from sepia to bold; *affective*, that is, they materialise as exhortations to feel differently, e.g., "get your mojo back," "feel alive"; and they offer a huge variety of *embodied practices* for generating self-worth and self-esteem, including different ways of speaking, of writing, of dressing, of using and holding one's body,

23

e.g., "stop touching your face," breathing, meditating etc. We have shown how these positivity imperatives, which have gained growing visibility and popularity in the last decade or so, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic have mobilised and channelled women's experiences and feelings in particular ways. More specifically, we demonstrated how the positivity complex and what we call the confidence cult(ure) (Gill and Orgad 2015) mobilise a set of dispositions, qualities and feelings designed to enable individuals to not simply survive but thrive and "feel alive" in times of a global pandemic, which has affected women disproportionally.

Our analysis has contributed to an existing literature on the neoliberalisation 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 and 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 which 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; Women's Budget Group 2020) and to harness "negative" feelings such as anger to promote those urgent societal changes. Yet our analysis suggests that the multiple crises caused and exposed by Covid-19 pandemic have also furnished a fertile ground for the fortification and expansion of the positivity and confidence imperatives. Indeed, the fundamental paradox we have highlighted in this paper is that in a moment when structural injustices and inequalities – particularly those related to gender, race and class – have been made ever more visible, positivity and individualised self-care interpellations to women flourish, anger is muted and critiques of structural inequality are silenced.

As we were writing this paper, 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, screens and apps endless positivity messages of the kind we discussed in this paper. We truly *wanted* these to work: in the face of such a huge crisis and in a context of

ongoing social isolation, the possibility of (re)gaining control, calmness and hope by buying certain products, practicing different ways of speaking, writing, dressing, breathing or holding and treating our body is extremely appealing and promising indeed. As Jennifer Silva (2013) notes, under neoliberalism, managing emotions – and we would add our thoughts, bodies, and behaviour – rather than the precariousness and inequality underpinning our society – becomes 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 Sara 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 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 and structural inequality.

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Notes

[1] https://www.abc.org.uk/product/16258

[2] https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/592473/untamed-by-glennon-doyle/

[3] This is how Gosia Syta requested that we present her. It is also how she describes herself on her LinkedIn profile.

[4] Amy Cuddy, "Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are Ted Talk,"19:33, accessed February 12, 2021, https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_may_shape_who_you_are?language=en
While Cuddy's Ted talk and her power posing theory are seemingly gender-neutral and address both women and men, this neutrality is undercut by various signifiers of gender (as well as race and class), including her use of the image of Wonder Woman, as well as of her own personal story as a young woman who was trained as a ballet dancer and later suffered brain injury following a car accident.