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“What’s Getting Us Through”: *Grazia* UK as affective intimate public during the coronavirus pandemic

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During a panel on “The State of Fashion Magazines”, hosted by *The Business of Fashion* seven months into the coronavirus pandemic, Kenya Hunt, then-Deputy Editor of *Grazia* UK, reflected on how the crisis had reshaped the magazine’s content:

We have the shopping at the front of the book that has been called ‘What’s New Now’ but we changed it in COVID to [...] ‘What’s Getting Us Through’ [...] Those newsy pages [are] where the brands probably are like, ‘can you put this launch in here, we’ve got this anniversary’ [...] Historically, that is what those pages had been for. But with us, it’s really more so about [...] those moments that will make a reader feel understood; it’s less about consuming the new thing although we still have that in there as well. But it’s really about acknowledging this shared experience that we’re having (BOF Team 2020).¹

The intimacy and sense of a shared common world that Hunt gestures toward here are qualities germane to women’s magazines, yet they assumed a particular resonance during the pandemic. After weeks of mixed messages from the British government about the severity of the crisis, on March 23, 2020, the UK’s first national lockdown began. Overnight, everyone in the UK was required to shelter in place, working from home or put on furlough unless they were an ‘essential worker’. People were forbidden from meeting with anyone outside their household, and from entering someone else’s residence, including those of family members

¹ The name of the section was changed to “What’s keeping us going now”, but the phrase ‘getting us through’ was frequently used in the magazine during the lockdown issues.

and intimate partners, with the exception of children whose parents resided in separate households. School and university classes went online. All non-essential businesses closed. Compounding the shock of the rhythms of everyday life being stopped was the horror of watching a deadly virus, about which little was known, quickly spread through the community.

Grazia UK is a weekly “fashion-focused” women’s magazine (Bradford 2019, 22), launched in 2005 in response to the speeding up of the fashion cycle, typically covering “what’s on shelves that week” (103) from luxury to fast fashion.² Except for their fashion editorial, weeklies are typically produced within a week, and in *Grazia*’s case, this results in content with an immediate focus: key news stories, from celebrity to current affairs; new product releases in fashion, beauty, entertainment, and homewares; and features couched in personal perspective. That its content “cut[s] across categories” (1987, 13) is consistent with Janice Winship’s reading of women’s magazines as reflective of women’s lives, where leisure is mixed with work, “private time and space are precious [...] and dreams and escape often feed on a modest vocabulary of everyday possibilities” (13). Understandable, then, that during the pandemic *Grazia* turned to “really explor[e] how our new reality had changed” (Hunt in BOF Team 2020): with its purpose to provide its predominantly middle-class, professional, female reader with tools to navigate the world around her, *Grazia* risked looking out of touch (at best) if it didn’t respond to the cataclysmic shift the pandemic prompted in all spheres of everyday life. And yet, the magazine’s tone is usually bright, upbeat and friendly, particularly when reporting on fashion, where the pleasures of consumption and fashion’s capacity to realise new femininities are foregrounded. The affects

² *Grazia* moved to a fortnightly production cycle in May 2020, presumably in response to the challenges of producing an issue each week during the pandemic. While this change was initially framed as short-term, at the time of writing the magazine was still being published fortnightly.

that the pandemic engendered – fear, anxiety, isolation, uncertainty, grief, strain and, for some, tedium – were decidedly at odds with this optimistic tenor and remit.

This chapter is interested in the ways *Grazia* UK responded to the pandemic’s “ugly feelings” (Ngai 2005). Through the close reading of five issues of *Grazia*, all produced during the UK’s first lockdown (March 23- June 2020, see Institute for Government n.d.), we will see how fashion was discursively produced as a means of affective sustenance for readers through its consoling pleasures and promise of momentary escape.³ In this content, the magazine largely remained faithful to its customary ideological commitment to neoliberal feminism: encouraging individual resourcefulness and self-transformation as a response to the challenges and ongoing project of being a woman in a particular time and place. Yet at the same time, the painful affects prompted by the pandemic opened a space for *Grazia* to critique the fashion system and – to an extent – question consumer culture, resisting the insistence on the self-sustaining subject to advocate for collective action and social investments. This possibility was predicated on the pandemic’s disruption of everyday life and the structural inequalities it laid bare. In *Grazia*’s gestures towards collective politics, however partial and tentative, we see the potential of women’s media to critique the capitalist systems within which it is imbricated. Lauren Berlant’s concept of “intimate publics” (2008) will anchor this discussion, as will feminist literature on women’s magazines.

***Grazia* as Intimate Public**

In their work on twentieth century women’s sentimental texts, Lauren Berlant mapped the ways in which women’s culture provides spaces for affective recognition and connection between women, promising proximity to the longed-for “better good life” (2008, 270) even

³ The issues I discuss in this chapter are Issue 770 (23 March 2020); Issue 771 (30 March 2020), Issue 772 (6 April 2020), Issue 776 (5 May 2020) and Issue 777 (18 May 2020). The UK’s emergence from lockdown was conducted in stages: people who couldn’t work from home returned to the workplace from 10 May, schools had a phased re-opening on 1 June and non-essential shops re-opened on 15 June.

as it avoids mobilizing political engagement to prompt structural change. The concept of intimate publics articulates the stranger relationality mediated and made possible by these texts (see also Berlant 2011, Warner 2002 and Felski 1989). The public the text addresses is presumed to “already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience” (2008, viii), the text functioning as a space where those individuals can feel recognised – the problems arising from their minoritized status acknowledged and framed as shared experience, their interests validated, their dreams encouraged – as it circulates affectively charged narratives to affirm a vaguely expressed collective belonging. In intimate publics “emotional contact, of a sort, is made” (2008, viii) through an individual’s identification with what is represented as generally experienced phenomena. Through this open-ended representation of experience and invitation to identify, reflect and seek relief through commodity culture, intimate publics provide a “complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline and discussion about how to live as an *x*” (viii).

Importantly, while the intimate publics Berlant discusses have the capacity to make women (and other marginalised people) feel that their lives – and the specific political and social issues arising from their subjectivity – matter, by articulating and validating these experiences in a space marked for women, their “relation to the political and to politics [are] extremely uneven and complex” (2008, viii). Intimate publics render conventional the forms of collective suffering or marginalisation claimed as part and parcel of women’s lives, yet they are

juxtapolitical [... thriving] in proximity to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough. (*x*)

The concept of intimate publics offers a valuable lens through which to evaluate *Grazia* and the work it did during the first 2020 lockdown. Many of the characteristics Berlant identifies as inherent to an intimate public are true of this publication. *Grazia* is for women, specifically those in the 25-45 age range and mostly with a professional class socio-economic profile.⁴ The concept of community is explicitly stated in *Grazia*'s Media Pack, which characterises readers as "a community of stylish, funny, ambitious, aspirational, warm, intelligent and successful women" (Bauer Media Group, n.d.). The notion of readers as participants in a community is central to the magazine's discursive construction and reflected in its content, which often grounds stories in individual experience, such as the section 'Things You Only Know If...', comprising a personal essay from a contributor reflecting on a difficult circumstance. The presumed relatability of these experiences is predicated on being a woman in the UK and suggests that readers share enough of a common lifeworld to recognise themselves in the content.

A fundamental aspect of *Grazia*'s content is its coverage of issues relating to women's political and social inequality in the UK. This ranges from raising topics to inform readers (often written up in the regular one-page 'Grazia View' section) to urging political leaders to advocate for policy change. For example, in November 2019, *Grazia* joined a campaign led by two UK MP's and campaign group We Can't Consent To This to lobby the UK Government to add a clause ending the 'rough sex' defence to the Domestic Abuse Bill. *Grazia* invited readers to sign a petition, resulting in 67, 000 signatures and, in the run-up to the 2020 General Election, asked the leaders of the three major political parties whether they would support this amendment to the bill (see Evans 2019). It was added in June 2020 and

⁴ *Grazia*'s Media Pack identifies their target reader as having an 'AB' profile. The UK Office for National Statistics categorises UK consumers into six categories according to their socio-economic status. 'AB' is the profile that classifies "higher and intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations" (UK Geographics n.d.).

passed into law in 2021 (see Bauer Media Group 2021). At other times, *Grazia*'s work is more juxta-political, gesturing toward the need for change without unpacking how such change might be realised. In these instances, coverage of women's issues is framed as "conceptual recalibration" (Berlant 2008, x), or awareness raising – for instance, the final sentences of a *Grazia* View on casting women in traditionally male roles read "Hollywood's gender-swaps won't solve sexism. We deserve our own thrilling stories – and our own heroes" (762, 5).

However, it is important to note that *Grazia* never claims to offer hard news coverage or analysis and neither does it clearly align with a partisan position. Here, as Janice Winship has argued of commercial women's magazines more generally, "the form the political takes [...] is about a commitment to certain ideologies" (1987, 21). In *Grazia*, this iterates as a commitment to neoliberal feminism, which "very clearly avows gender inequality" while "simultaneously disavow[ing] the socio-economic and cultural structures shaping [women's] lives" (Rottenberg in Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, 7). The feminist subject formed by this ideology is one, as Catherine Rottenberg has observed, "who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" (7). Extending from this, we can understand *Grazia*'s reader as responsible for shaping the project of her life, the core constituents of which are reflected in the magazine's content: she takes an active interest in the world around her, intervening where she can but mostly by being aware of the key issues each week (current affairs content); she enjoys the pleasures of fashion and beauty, seeing her home as an extension of herself, a place to entertain and rest (lifestyle and fashion content); and she strives to achieve 'balance' through attending to her finances, her mental health and general wellbeing (advice content, occasional fitness and cooking content). This idealised disposition recalls Angela McRobbie's critique of 'the perfect', a benchmark for women that, she argues, arose to modify the "patriarchal retrenchment" enacted by feminism, and which equates

female success with control (of one's affairs and one's body) and individualism (2015, 4). The theme of 'balance' also arises in relation to *Grazia*'s non-partisan approach to British politics. Occasionally, MPs from one of the main political parties in the UK will contribute on issues relating to being a woman in the public eye or on political issues pertaining to gender equality. Election coverage typically includes perspectives from candidates or voters from across the political spectrum. The accommodation of different political commitments can be read in line with neoliberal feminism, which "sh[ies] away from argument and confrontation" (Rottenberg 2018, 82), also evident in the magazine's statement that their readers are "feminists who are redefining how their versions of feminism play out for them" (Bauer Media Group, n.d.).

Understanding *Grazia*'s content in this way helps us appreciate the significance of the lockdown issues' shift in content and tone. Optimism fell away, as did the magazine's "positive and productive" ethos (Bauer Media Group, n.d.), its discursive construction that emphasises the reader's agency and ability to succeed if she works hard and smart enough. Yet, instead of completely destabilising the publication and its editorial purpose, *Grazia* drew on its habitual conventions – including its discursive construction of fashion – to reassure readers, and sometimes even indicate towards the importance of collectivity rather than individualism.

Feelgood Fashion

One of the effects of the outbreak and rapid global spread of COVID-19 was the rupturing of the fantasy of the 'good life' so central to women's media (see Winship 1987, Ferguson 1983, Gough-Yates 2003, Duffy 2013, McRobbie 2015, Berlant 2019). This fantasy is predicated on the investment in a future in which happiness and fulfilment is possible. It promises that the idealised feminine self, home, and career found in the magazine's pages –

the good life and the better you who lives it – can be realised through consumption and by investing in and regulating the self. The specific characteristics of this ideal, and its apparent proximity or distance from the reader’s lifeworld, depends on the title, but the good life’s dependence on self-actualisation – and the fundamental role commodities and self-work play in realising it – do not. Not only did the shock and horror of mass disease and death, and the subsequent restrictions placed on civilian populations, suspend any illusion of the good life currently being lived, but the likelihood of a better future was also temporarily cast in doubt. The affects arising from this sudden occurrence are consistent with Sianne Ngai’s definition of “ugly feelings”, which she argues can be conceived of as negative in three ways: they are “dysphoric”, in evoking “pain or displeasure” (2005, 11); “semantically negative”, in being “saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values”, and “syntactically negative [...] organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction” (2005, 11). *Grazia* could not maintain its customary “breathless and excitable and giddy and fun” tone (Polly Vernon in Bradford, 2019, 136) and remain relevant to readers’ lives. Instead, it drew on the lexicon of fashion consumption as pleasurable, reframing its distracting pleasures as consolatory and an anticipatory investment in a temporarily postponed future. In this way, the magazine reacted to the “politically charged predicament of suspended agency” (Ngai 2005, 12) by offering readers a route, through fashion and dress, by which dysphoric feelings could be momentarily escaped or transformed into positive feelings with the power to ‘keep us going’.

Indeed, one of the dominant messages attached to fashion in these issues is its mood-boosting properties. Sometimes this was framed through the transformative promise of buying something new – for example, Gucci’s chain-link pumps “promise to bring you some much-needed joy right now” (772, 57); at others, it was enough to simply get dressed. Issue 771, which appears to be the first issue wholly produced by the team working from home (WFH), hit newsstands a week after the UK went into lockdown. It includes a story titled

“Working from home? There’s an outfit for that now” (16). It does not directly reference depression, but much of the advice given indexes the lethargy and sadness inherent to that state: “so what should you be wearing? Well, start by wearing something. Anything. The power of getting up and getting dressed is not to be underestimated” (16). The article mildly jokes about turning into an unshowered slob before advising readers to “*feel* work-ready” (my emphasis) by dressing in “something softly-tailored” rather than “a stained tracksuit and no bra” (16). The suggestion that readers can transmute low feelings into feelings of preparedness by getting dressed is also framed as a form of self-care: “swathing yourself in softness, without forgetting style, is a fashion reminder to be kind to yourself” (17).

Clothes as a source of comfort and power elaborated in the next issue through a feature with the same name. Getting dressed becomes a “personal pact to take something out of the day and to engage with the world, even when you’re behind closed doors” (772, 45). The circumstance for getting dressed here is WFH, but instead of offering a selection of specific looks for readers to adopt, the feature espouses an eclectic array of garments with different comforting properties: “the cuddle of a cashmere sweater, the anarchic comfort of an elasticated waistband, the peppy energy boost of a[n] incongruously glamorous top, [which] are all a tonic in these most unsettling times” (45). These garments reveal the different comforts afforded by clothes in this context, whether sensory (feeling held by the softness of cashmere) or affective (the spirits being lifted through wearing colourful clothes). This affective interplay between wearer and clothing recalls Ilya Parkins’ observation that “dress is a profoundly intimate and co-invested mediator of mood, worn as it is on the body – it helps us see that mood is circulated through a provisional articulation of living beings and non-human material” (2021, 805).

Advice took a different form in a feature by Polly Vernon in the same issue, drawing on her experience of having worked from home for years as a freelancer. She couches her

guidance in the affective: “you should be prepared for how epically discombobulating [WFH] feels in the early days” because the absence of the office is “a loss” (772, 55). She advises adopting routines and avoiding a low affective state by choosing not to stay in “ratty T-shirt and battered PJ pants [... because] ‘no one will know’ [...] *You will know!* And you will not feel good about it” (56, emphasis in original). Vernon also reframes the curtailment of agency imposed by governmental lockdowns as an opportunity (in line with *Grazia*’s customary upbeat tone): she suggests using the time saved from commuting “to work on the ever-evolving oeuvre that is your look [...] (NB: this is also a realistic goal for quarantine. I know you think you’re going to learn French and write a novel – but you’re not. You may well, however, emerge from it better styled than you were when you went in.)” (56). Vernon’s message here is galvanising – there’s something you can do to meet the uncertain conditions head-on – as is the humour with which it is conveyed. She embraces the “shallowness” of her solutions because “a) shallow is all that’s standing between me and madness right now (Keep Shallow and Carry On), and b) [...] when we dress ourselves [...w]e establish an intention for ourselves [...] We remind ourselves that there is more to us than merely ‘getting through’ the next few days, weeks, months” (56). In this way, the mood-boosting properties attributed to clothes defied the seriousness and heaviness of the pandemic, evident too in the same issue’s recommendation of “silly dressing” (772, 7). Whether taking form through a tulle Maison Cléo dress – “No such thing as De Trop in your home!” – or a pink American Vintage boilersuit – “If you don’t need a pair of pink overalls now – then when?” (7) – the playfulness of clothes and the pleasures of consuming new ones were foregrounded. There seems also an implied release here from the ways that anticipation of other people’s perception can curtail the possibilities of dressing. The giddy exhortation is to dress however you please, because in the enclosure of your own home, who’s going to see you?

The magazine also encouraged readers to invest in the imaginative escapism afforded by buying clothes to wear in the better future. This discursive device – dressing towards the future through the accoutrements of a new season – is, of course, common to fashion magazines. Yet here, emptied of the blithe certainty of pre-lockdown issues, it assumed the keen edge of a longed-for time whose actual arrival was uncertain. Issue 776 encouraged readers to “make the beach feel closer” by buying a holiday wardrobe even though their “holiday plans might be on ice” (58), whereas Issue 777 invited them to plan a post-lockdown holiday inspired by Gucci’s pre-fall 2020 campaign or Maje’s new capsule collection featuring Slim Aarons’ photographs. This wishful thinking bypassed the ugly feelings of lockdown using fashion and fashion imagery – that which is available now – to conjure the relief of dreaming of better days. Summer holidays not only signified escape from the familiarity and tedium of being confined to one’s home but also anticipated distant, optimistic affects: release, pleasure, relaxation. Acquiring new summer clothes offered a means of materialising that hope, even if once acquired they would remain unworn indefinitely.

Without wishing to be cynical, or to discount the genuine efforts of the *Grazia* team to offer readers comfort and light relief, the magazine’s neoliberal feminist ideology is resonant in these messages. Catherine Rottenberg defines neoliberalism as “a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting the individual as human capital and thus capital-enhancing agents” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, 8). The individual is idealised as a self-managed and self-sustaining economic unit, as market logics infiltrate into private space and concepts of identity and personhood. Neoliberal feminism partially resists this unchecked expansion of capital logics through the notion of “happy work-family balance” (Rottenberg 2018, 14), which functions as “normative frame and ultimate ideal” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, 8). The ability of the neoliberal feminist subject to achieve emancipation through her balance of home and

professional commitments signals liberation from having to choose between or, crucially, sacrifice the pleasures (and profits) of either.

This striving for balance is characteristic of *Grazia*, evident in the range of topics included in the publication, yet it is particularly interesting to consider in relation to how these concerns are distributed in the lockdown issues. Coverage of the challenges of parenting and undertaking domestic labour was often published in the Hot Stories section or as a *Grazia* Feature, thereby framing these as issues relating to gender equality and requiring the reader's attention. When 'working from home' was invoked, it always referenced undertaking professional paid employment from the home: 'working' in the context of the fashion coverage did not seem to include domestic labour or parenting. The challenge to be surmounted here (as remedied through the fashion content) was therefore not only the strangeness and isolation of working from home, but the need to look professional while doing so – for the domestic environment to not destabilise the working woman's performance of competence. So much is evident in the language used to discursively construct the fashion items featured in a spread titled "Boss your WFH wardrobe – we've got an outfit for every home office scenario" (772, 58). The adjectives used to render the clothes meaningful mirror the dispositions they could produce in their wearer: "*hard-working* basics"; "*energising* florals"; "*smart* dresses" (59-61, my emphasis). By extension, we could read *Grazia*'s encouragement of readers to master WFH dressing, taking time to dream of a better future (and consume towards it) and embrace silly dressing as a means to both exhaust the affective incoherence prompted by the pandemic and to persevere – to be able to continue producing a capable, balanced and stylish individualised feminine subjectivity.

However, interestingly, this ideology was at times challenged within these same issues. Where *Grazia*'s ideal subject is "a savvy, affluent, confident, busy and modern woman who actively participates in the world around her" (Bauer Media Group, n.d.), in

these issues, the ground of her success is her ability simply to cope, ideally with a measure of humour, resilience and style. Seeing the lockdown as an opportunity to over-achieve and ‘upskill’ was gently critiqued, as evident in Polly Vernon’s mockery of unrealistic goals, above, or in Issue 776’s admonishment of Gwyneth Paltrow for treating lockdown like “a hybrid of an extended spa break and Open University degree” (23). By contrast, readers are given permission to not feel guilty “if all you’re achieving is just coping. Be gentle on yourself and stay safe” (772, 23). That *Grazia* could accommodate these conflicting messages is consonant with the contradictory nature of women’s magazines (see Winship 1987 and Gill 2007). Rosalind Gill reads this quality as indicative of “the fragmented nature of ideologies” (2007, 173) and the result of seeking to appeal to a diverse group while addressing them as if they all share a common lifeworld. Yet perhaps *Grazia*’s conflicting messages can be understood in this context not as the result of conflicting ideologies so much as the result of conflict between the neoliberal investment in the individual’s ability to succeed if they just work hard enough and the ways in which the pandemic laid bare the futility of this ideology. A means of coping with the shock of the realisation – for *Grazia* staffers and by extension, their readers – of their limited agency was to find ways of replicating familiar behaviours (dressing for success, comforting and pleasing the self through fashion consumption) while acknowledging the overall alienation and anxiety of their circumstances.

Yet, at other times, *Grazia*’s lockdown-era issues reject this ideology entirely, moving away from the emphasis on the individual to advocate for community and question whether the pandemic might usher in systemic change. This content offers a glimpse of the political and affective affordances of women’s media, a focus to which I now turn.

We’re In This Together

One of the tensions inherent in women's magazines is that despite the intimacy of the discursive "we" that presumes common female experience, the solutions to the social and political challenges of women's experiences are framed as resolvable at the level of the individual "with an emphasis on personal solutions at the expense of collective social or political struggle" (Gill 2007, 165). Berlant identifies "aloneness" as "one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally underprivileged" (2008, ix), so for women to encounter the fantasy of "my life [...as] an experience understood by other women" is one of the consolations offered by women's texts and their "commodified genres of intimacy" (x). The individual's ability to overcome is usually harnessed to her personal resources and consumption. As Brooke Erin Duffy argues, by harnessing a consumer ethos to idealised femininities, women's magazines "ostensibly convey the notion that women can resolve their problems within the marketplace" (2013, 34).

Yet in *Grazia's* lockdown issues, three forms of collectivity surfaced, serving to shift the magazine's customary focus on the individual and elision of collective politics. These included acknowledging the comfort inherent in addressing the pandemic's collectively experienced ugly feelings; gesturing towards the importance of collective assumption of responsibility to address the pandemic's social exigencies; and encouraging readers to take advantage of the pandemic's interruption of 'normal life' to rethink consumption and question the fashion industry's unsustainability. These were all parsed in *Grazia's* intimate tone and couched in the discursive construction of equivalence between magazine team and reader, framing our common experience as a way of 'getting through' to a better, kinder, more sustainable "new dawn" (777, 71).

While what is shared amongst the female readers of women's magazines tends to be vague and open-ended, the restrictions of the nationally mandated lockdown did induce a collective experience amongst the population. For *Grazia* to invoke feelings that 'we' were

going through reflected a horizon of experience familiar to its readership of predominantly middle-class, professional, female readers, most of whom would have been either working from home or on furlough. While the issues did not consistently address the specificities of what readers may have found challenging, its assumption was that the lockdown was alienating and difficult for everyone, regardless of whether their particular strains related to childcare, being unpartnered, being pregnant, and so on. Readers, like *Grazia*'s editorial team, didn't know how long the lockdown would be in place, or what short- and long-term effects the pandemic would have on their health, that of their loved ones, the economy, or their livelihood. In this context, *Grazia*'s frequent references to the affective strain of the lockdown can be read as a continuation of the ways in which intimate publics suggest a "broadly common historical experience" and "commonly lived history" (2019, viii) but with direct resonance to the circumstances in which its predominantly professional class readers found themselves. By addressing the multitudinous affects of the pandemic, the magazine fostered a "place of recognition and reflection" (2019, viii) and provided "anchors for realistic, critical assessment of the way things are" (2019, viii). This approach was successful for the title, which saw average issue sales increase by 65% compared with pre-pandemic sales, despite their shift in publishing from weekly to fortnightly (BOF Team 2021). There was comfort to be found in letting go – "the world feels like it's ending and you've run out of toilet roll, so why not relax and watch something nice?" (772, 77) – in letting clothes "lift your spirits" (776, 57). Everyday efforts to cope were framed as providing some ballast against the collectively experienced "strange, surreal and scary" (772, 3) "time of anxiety" (770, 10). That the *Grazia* team were in it with 'us' often came through in Editor Hattie Brett's 'Welcome to the Issue' letters, where she reflected on the disorienting speed of change and its implications for how the magazine was put together and what it focused on. "When we started planning this week's high street issue we could never have imagined that

the world would be in the grips of a pandemic” (770, 3); “like a lot of you, the entire *Grazia* team is now working from home” (772, 3) – direct addresses that create a sense of equivalence between team and reader, further reiteration that, as Brett writes in Issue 771 “we’re in this together” (3).

In such use of language, the *Grazia* team assume the role of Everywoman, a long-established rhetorical device of equivalence between magazine teams and readers. Indeed, journalists interviewed by Angela McRobbie for a study of women’s magazines described the identification they felt with the readers of their publications, “making decisions and arguing their case by casting themselves as readers [... and seeing] themselves as actively assisting and thereby producing readers as fashionable young women” (1996, 179-180). While the lockdown issues still encouraged consumption, as organised by the expert eye and insider knowledge of the team, the expert orientation of the cultural intermediary was affectively reframed: the *Grazia* team discursively performed being as unmoored as their readers, thereby heightening the sense of a shared (overwhelming) experience and an open-ended sense of belonging and support. This work was supported by an audience research strategy *Grazia* implemented at the beginning of the pandemic: they “recruited 20 readers from across the country to be part of a Whatsapp group in which they discussed their changing habits, their feelings, hopes, and fears” which, according to publisher Lauren Holleyoake, offered insights on “what our audience needed from us” that then shaped *Grazia*’s content (Holleyoake in Browne-Swinburne 2021).

Fashion was also used as grounds for reflecting on how the collective nature of this experience might change one’s values and perspective. Readers were invited to rethink the concept of “luxury” in “The Great Rethink”, a feature in Issue 777 in which a number of British fashion designers described what luxury meant for them during lockdown. Here, the common experience of having the rhythms of one’s professional life interrupted and being

restricted to one's domestic space – which, for many, may not have felt luxurious in any way – was framed as opportunity to re-evaluate one's perception of what is most rare and valuable. The kinds of luxuries described were predominantly relational, including “heightened appreciation for family” (Christopher Kane), “reassessing consumption” (Matty Bovan) and having time to spend with their children (Preen's Justin Thornton and Thea Bregazzi). Designers spoke about living with their parents, doing craft with their children, and embracing simple pursuits such as looking at art, taking baths and reading.

The comfort of acknowledging that lockdown was a shared experience, however traumatising and disorienting, also galvanised through appeals to the reader to see their responsibility as a collective one: to act in accordance with guidance about minimising the spread of COVID-19 and to shop to save British jobs. For Issue 772, *Grazia* produced four alternate covers, each featuring an NHS worker in scrubs, briefly shot in the carpark of the hospital where she was on shift. The main coverline appealed to readers' sense of moral duty, reading, in part, “From the Frontline: ‘We're putting ourselves in danger. Please help us help you’.”⁵ The accompanying shared the four workers' accounts of the pain of caring for dying patients unable to say goodbye to their families, the dire need for more PPE, their fear that they'd spread the virus to loved ones, and a direct appeal to readers: “I just need to know I can trust you to stay at home” (paramedic Sarah Blanchard, 15).

If these experiences offered a bracing insight into the ‘frontline’, at other points, the same issue offered encouragement by pointing to the ways citizens were working together as members of a community. “This pandemic is bringing out the best in us”, declared the issue's *Grazia View* (772, 5). “It's easy to feel overwhelmed right now and spend evenings panic-scrolling [but] doom and gloom aside, this country is shaping up to be pretty incredible when

⁵ The four covers can be viewed on Bauer Media Group's website: www.bauermedia.co.uk/news/grazia-magazine-publishes-four-split-covers-featuring-four-frontline-nhs-workers-for-nhs-dedicated-issue

it comes to handling a crisis” (5). Evidence of this included references to “community efforts to help neighbours who feel lonely or isolated and a rush of gifts being left on ambulances” (5). The invocation of a resilient national spirit and allusion to being at war with the virus paralleled comparisons being made in British media more generally at the time to Britons’ ‘Blitz spirit’ during the Second World War. By referring to historical precedent, however applicable it may have been to the 2020 lockdown, the coronavirus pandemic was framed as a large-scale catastrophe that could be met – and eventually overcome – by communities working together and fostering a resilient spirit.

The importance of seeing one’s contribution to society as a collective responsibility was framed differently in relation to the British high street. The issue that coincided with the start of lockdown happened to be a ‘high street issue’, devoted to covering what was new from fast fashion brands whose stores are found on the ‘high street’, a British term for the main street of a city or town where local shops and businesses are located (Office for National Statistics 2019). In her ‘Welcome to the Issue’ letter, Hattie Brett wrote of her hope that “our high streets will remain [after the lockdown]; not only because they’re a crucial part of our culture, but because they help connect communities” (770, 3). The next issue declared “Your shops need you!” referencing ‘Your country needs you’ (Leete, n.d.), the famous First World War propaganda campaign urging men to join the British war effort. In this story, shopping is constructed as a way of helping by supporting the livelihood of fashion businesses and their employees. Focus is initially given to Italian fashion businesses, then at the “epicentre of Europe’s coronavirus crisis” (770, 24) and therefore “need[ing] plenty of love right now” (24). Then readers are exhorted to prioritise shopping with small businesses and independent labels, their choices guided by the selection of clothes displayed alongside the text. Issue 777 reiterates this mindset by advising readers of the “homegrown labels [...] to be supporting now” (64), consumption conceptualised as a benevolent act. This discourse

bears striking resemblance to the ways that American women were exhorted to “shop to save the country [...] and asked to do their part for the war effort” (Mayhall 2009, 34) in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In this parallel instance, fashion consumerism was mobilised as a “key [factor] in the short-term economic and emotional recovery of the United States” (Pham 2011, 386) by politicians and prominent players within the fashion industry, effectively harnessing neoliberal concepts of individuality and self-determination to fashion (see Pham 2011).

However, the ethics of consuming anything at all is briefly questioned in Issue 776’s “The Great Debate: Should you be shopping right now?” (54). The affirmative response emphasised the positive effects of shopping, perhaps best summarised by Laura Antonia Jordan’s encouragement to readers to “take those reasons to smile where you can” (55). On the other hand, the negative position urges readers to take advantage of the disruption afforded by the pandemic to “reassess our relationship with our clothes” (56). The connection between responsibility and the high street shifts here, as Eco-Age founder Livia Firth, quoted in the piece, urges readers to think of the “millions of garment workers in countries such as Bangladesh or Cambodia [...] who are considered] disposable [...] abandoned by the fast-fashion brands they were producing for” (56). Firth here references the refusal of several US and European fast fashion brands to pay suppliers for orders placed before the outbreak of coronavirus, an outstanding debt estimated at £12.3bn (McNamara 2020). Yet rather than dwell on this exploitation, the mood is re-set by Natalie Hammond, who encourages readers to look through what they already own to “unearth [...] gems that will put a spring in your step” (56). Indeed, *Grazia* only briefly gestures towards the extractive, exploitative practices of global fashion production; one other instance is in “The Great Rethink”, where Kenya Hunt writes that even before the pandemic, the fashion industry “was at a crossroads, as questions about its relentless pace, enormous carbon footprint and patchy track record on

diversity overshadowed the clothes” (44). Yet the possibilities afforded by the pandemic for consumers to pursue or demand more sustainable action from fashion producers were immediately foreclosed by the re-attachment of fashion to dress, to the individual. As in Hammond’s piece, above, Hunt concludes that a solution lies in “get[ting] dressed in a more mindful way” (44).

By contrast, Issue 777 elaborates the notion of collective responsibility in a more directly political way in a story by British journalist Sarah Mower titled “How the fashion industry became an emergency service” (777, 13). The first sentence reads: “Who knew that an industry much-faulted for its superficiality, its feeding of narcissistic consumerism and its damage to the planet would be the very one to weigh in with pandemic emergency services much more quickly than many a Western government?” (14), immediately marking this as a very different kind of fashion feature than the magazine usually runs. From milliners in London’s East End making face shields for hospital workers to Louis Vuitton making PPE in its factories, Mower praises the speedy response of “designers, mega-brands and manufacturers” and individuals – “bespoke tailors, students, citizen volunteers, drivers-people involved in fashion everywhere [...] and throughout the length and breadth of Britain” – responding to the lack of “central system in charge” (14). Indeed, Mower frames the failures of the UK government as putting “hurdles” in the way of the “extraordinary British women” leading community efforts. One example given is that of Caroline Gration, organiser of The Fashion School’s sewing programme for children, whose daughter runs an ICU unit. She organised a “sanitised, socially-distanced production unit making surgical gowns from repurposed operating theatre drapes for the Royal Brompton Hospital” (14), taken as characteristic of “a kindness, a resourcefulness, and a capacity for work that could bring hope of employment all over Britain” (14). Frustration and fear are the ground from which agentive action is mobilised, the individual encouraged to admire – and ideally join –

collective, community-based direct action. The trope of the neoliberal feminist, embodied here by Graton, is re-situated within a network of collective action, being offered as a relatable route into a collective mindset rather than as a heroine whose agency is testament to her alone. Moreover, importantly, Mower indicates here towards a better future reshaped by this collective work: “what we’re learning through this time will count for the future of our country. It’s taught us the power of localism, of what can be achieved even when there’s no central system in charge” (14). The necessity of local, collective action to address the failures of government services is hardly a new concept, but that it is framed as such within this article demonstrates how unusual this message is within *Grazia*’s remit. Its political work, as introduced earlier, usually focuses on a single issue at a time, with a direct course of action for individual readers: sign the petition, write to your MP, be aware. What Mower outlines here is much more open-ended, inviting readers to question, “what effect this time will have on our loyalties in the future: will we want to see social responsibility literally woven into the fabric of what we buy?” (14)

Keep Shallow and Carry On

Issue 780 was released on June 16, 2020, the day after non-essential shops in the UK re-opened. Its main coverline read: “It’s time to get dressed again! The best ‘re-entry’ buys”. While the issue devoted considerable space to addressing George Floyd’s murder and the resulting widespread Black Lives Matter protests, the tone of the fashion content resumed a cautiously optimistic register. This is most evident in a feature by Hattie Crisell reflecting on how she lost her taste for getting dressed during the lockdown yet concluding on a hopeful note, as she anticipates what to wear to a birthday “as the first hints of movement emerge after a season of standing still. Something hopeful, something defiant, something fabulous [...] We’re back, after all – and fashion, our old friend, has waited for us” (47). Whatever

glimpses the lockdown offered for *Grazia* to re-evaluate their commitment to promoting consumption, interrogate the practices of the fashion industry or encourage a collective mindset receded as soon as the restrictions started to ease.

What are we to make of this fascinating record, the “storehouses of information” these issues provide “about the values, social practices and behaviours of the [era] in which they [were] published” (Hunt 2012, 131)? We have seen how the timescale of *Grazia*’s production schedule resulted in content that mapped in real-time the pandemic’s affective shifts, from disbelief in the first weeks of the lockdown, to the growing realisation of the scale and intensity of the crisis, to deep uncertainty of how to think about the future – indeed, of what kind of future would be ‘waiting’ on the other side. One striking aspect of these issues was how their customary affective register could be suspended without destabilising their commitment to promoting consumption. By framing consuming fashion as an agentic response to the “flatness” and “ongoingness” of the pandemic’s ugly feelings (Ngai 2005, 7), clothing was invested with the power to comfort, console and, at times, change the mood entirely. That this process was couched in personal experiences and laden with connotations of self-care and self-motivation demonstrated the resilience of neoliberal feminism as an ideological underpinning, even when any semblance of ‘balance’ between working and home life had evaporated.

At the same time, the shortening of the horizon of futurity against which *Grazia* could project opened a conditional space in which aspects the magazine rarely criticises or mentions could be voiced, however briefly and tentatively. The painful affects and disruption caused by the pandemic made this possible, just as the perception of leaving that period behind again made resonant discourses of unreserved fashion consumption. The lacuna opened by the pandemic’s interruption of everyday life functioned as both prompt and space for reflecting on the ways the fashion system is predicated on unsustainable and unethical

practices but that this was structured by negative affects meant that emerging from lockdown entailed a relieved escape from both the issues and the feelings.

While this case study exemplifies Berlant's argument that there is immense difficulty in "inducing structural transformation out of shifts in collective feeling" (2008, xii), it also reveals the flimsiness of neoliberal feminism's investment in consumer culture. The subtext of *Grazia*'s endorsement of clothes' capacities to boost the mood was that this capacity is ephemeral, transitory. What "power" does clothing offer beyond helping the wearer feel more able to meet the demands of their day? To what sustained end the mood-boosting? Getting dressed and consuming clothes certainly offer momentary pleasures, and afford different ways of experiencing the self, but the gap between these capacities and the existential crisis the pandemic posed revealed the need for more concerted, sustained political action to create a world in which the dignity and safety of human life could be maintained. The ephemerality of fashion's feelings showed their limits: they ameliorated but could not resolve. Framing the contents of consumer culture as some small consolation – not insignificant, but unable to truly a way forward to a better self and life – led the magazine to start exploring different ways that 'we' could project into the future. That this, too, was foreclosed by the return to discourses of fashion as integral to the realisation of a new self, ready to re-meet society, perhaps demonstrates how contingent that tentative political work was on the system being interrupted.

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