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Politics and the political in women's fashion magazines

Perspectives from India, Russia and the USA

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CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction

1.1 Fashion media embrace the political

Throughout 2021, *Vogue US* profiled and shot cover photographs of Kamala Harris, the then incoming Vice-President of the United States (for its February issue); Amanda Gorman, the poet who performed at President Joe Biden's inauguration (for its May issue); and Dr Jill Biden, the new first lady of the US (for its August issue). The increased exposure that the magazine gave these women, affiliated with the US Democrats and Biden's administration, was all the more conspicuous, as, notoriously, *Vogue* had expressly refrained from featuring the previous first lady Melania Trump, the wife of the former 45th US President Donald Trump. The magazine's overtly positive coverage of the new administration was just one of *Vogue*'s many highly visible gestures endorsing the Democratic Party, its policies and the politicians affiliated with it. Of these, editor-in-chief Anna Wintour's enthusiastic support of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential race was the most notable.

This expression of partisan support indicates the active and strong involvement of the magazine in American politics. But such involvement is not an anomaly, a one-off case, but rather, it points to a tendency within contemporary mainstream fashion and lifestyle media of broadly and actively engaging with politics. Such engagement is typically not just expressed through the magazines' coverage of political events, personalities and affairs, but also includes opinions on feminism, diversity and inclusion, and discussions of power and discrimination. With their increased focus on politics, fashion and lifestyle magazines are adopting a political position and are making a foray into what is still perceived as an uncharted territory for lifestyle media – a terrain that some would argue they should stay away from.

Yet, it is not only in the US that discussions of politics have seemingly become integral to mainstream fashion publications. Across the globe, fashion and lifestyle titles address political issues in their editorial coverage, initiating discussions on human rights, feminism, access, privilege and inclusivity, on global sustainability policies and migration. To name but a few examples, Indian fashion magazines have been known to publicly advocate for women's rights, Russian fashion publications openly criticised the state (before such criticism became outlawed and impossible (Reuters, 2022)), and Mexican fashion magazines have addressed the historical disenfranchisement of indigenous people.

This broad engagement of fashion and lifestyle media with politics and the political, still largely perceived as novel and unusual, is the central theme of this work, and its main research question concerns how politics and the political are expressed in fashion magazines. In the pursuit of this question, this work addresses how fashion publications' views on politics relate to globally changing views on citizenship, activism and civic duty, on the one hand, or comport with the genre of the fashion magazine, on the other hand. Conflations between spectacularity, activism, consumption and politics, characteristic of the current moment, as well as the exigencies, limitations and historically gendered character of fashion media are explored in more detail further in the Introduction.

This study focuses on the time span between late 2019 and early 2023, and seeks to identify political discourses in the magazines and situate them within wider political and cultural contexts. It is based on data from three countries – India, Russia and the USA, drawing on examples from mainstream fashion and lifestyle publications for women. In these three countries, lifestyle media have developed in very different ways, under very different historical and cultural circumstances, but what is characteristic of all three is the prominence of political divisiveness, polarisation and hostility within society. These are societies in tumult, with democracy in various stages of peril, and the media affected by misinformation and polarisation and being used to justify political ends and goals, endorse policies or disseminate propaganda. The ways in which different socio-cultural circumstances impact the magazines' coverage of politics and the political remains firmly within the focus of this work, which also engages with the question of how (in)

consistent the coverage of politics is across the globe and across international titles.

Before turning to the issue of the fashion media's political participation, I would like to briefly outline the current political circumstances in the three countries that are the focus of this research. In India, the nationalist government, under the premiership of right-wing politician Narendra Modi, has been known to suppress media freedom and silence voices that speak out against the caste, religion and gender-based discriminatory policies of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party. At the same time, expressions of nationalism and communal hate appear to be sanctioned by the state, and the crimes of right-wing militant organisations against religious and caste minorities remain unpunished (Banaji, 2018; Banaji & Bhat, 2022). The Russia of the 2020s is an authoritarian state with a powerful propaganda machine that claims to have absolute authority on how facts and events are to be interpreted, understood and represented, and the suppression of the country's political, public and media spheres evoke the totalitarian system of the Soviet Union (Oates, 2012). Russia has been waging a war against neighbouring Ukraine since 2022, further criminalising expressions of dissent and criticisms of the war inside the country. Lastly, in the USA, partisan divisions manifest themselves in biased media that tend to promote one political agenda or another – at times, with little concern for objectivity (Goel, Iyengar & Peterson, 2021; Grimmer, Iyengar & Tyler, 2022). Misinformation is on the rise, and across US states, human rights, in particular women's, trans people's and migrants' rights, are suppressed under Republican state governments.

It is within these political contexts that mainstream fashion and lifestyle media have emerged as political commentators and agents with clear political positions and views. This phenomenon can be seen as part of the pervasive politicisation and polarisation of society and culture on a global scale (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018), or the emergence of what Lili Chouliaraki has dubbed 'mediated' democracy – a public sphere that operates through instant mediatisation (Chouliaraki, 2000), facilitated by the widespread and pervasive digital and social media. The omnipresence of social media, with its endless stream of information and opinions, coincides with what appears to be an era of perpetual crisis, where

austerity, precarity and risk are the new norm (Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2012). Climate crises are looming, human rights across the globe are being violated – and digital media grant us what seems like permanent access to these sites of unfolding disasters. In this context, the political permeates our day-to-day lives, and naturally percolates into cultural life and popular culture, as the increasingly attention-grabbing political gestures on digital media become impossible to ignore. Pervasive, omnipresent and spectacular, they are boosted by current demands for performativity and celebrity. Such gestures, designed to generate attention and affective reaction on a large scale, are, however, also potentially primed for controversy.

This extremely brief overview of the political circumstances in the three countries analysed and the current state of global media and politics might seem pessimistic, but it also conveys the anxieties and concerns that have come to shape contemporary attitudes to the media and its political coverage. It also depicts the rationale for this study, as I, too, am convinced that the visibly increased presence of politics in culture, over-saturation of information, and a conflation of politics, visibility and celebrity are some of the factors that make this research not only possible, but also necessary and timely.

1.2 Politics and the political

As the title of this study shows, it engages both with politics and the political. The fact that both terms feature in the title is no coincidence, and before I discuss the premise of my research in more detail, I would like to make a distinction between the two terms.

Firstly, there is 'political' as an intrinsic part of everyday life and culture, which is best expressed in Judith Butler's notion that 'everything is political' (Butler, 2009). This recognition that the political marks all spheres of life and cultural production is not new. Famously, Pierre Bourdieu's groundbreaking *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* establishes an inextricable connection between social class and matters of taste – Bourdieu dismantles Kant's view on taste as pure and objective and recognises the inherently political dimension of taste

and beauty (Bourdieu, 1989). Dynamics of power and dominance shape the field of culture – as Stuart Hall remarks, 'those relations which articulate and disarticulate the field of culture always result in areas of preference, and areas of preference always imply areas of marginalization and subordination' (Hall, 2018: 933). Hall's observation alludes to the political causes of cultural voids and absences. Feminist theory and feminist art theory have similarly challenged the exclusion of women from classic culture, calling for the personal to be understood as political, and exposing how power shapes the private sphere, identity and gender (Butler, 1993). The feminist writings of the 1980s–1990s analysed how gender was shaped by power, situating gender and identity as inherently political and prompting fresh interest in previously marginalised expressions of femininity and queerness in culture, society and the media (Gavison, 1992; Boyd, 1997; Butler, 1999). I will address these underlying workings of power and expressions of ideology as manifestations of the political.

Culture and politics have been a long-standing subject of Jacques Rancière's work. Jacques Rancière, polemicising with both Bourdieu and Kant, declares that the aesthetic and the political permeate each other, and also notes how aesthetics are predicated on visibility, access to speech, mastery of language and recognition of labour (Rancière, 1993; Rancière, 2005). Rancière proposes a definition of 'metapolitics,' an overarching presence of the political in society, culture and art:

> a metapolitics of the sensory community, aimed at achieving what had been missed by the 'merely political' revolution—freedom and equality incorporated in living attitudes, in a new harmony between the distribution of bodies and the distribution of words, between the places, the occupations and the modes of being and speaking (Rancière, 2005).

To explain how politics is integrated into artistic expression and is inherent in aesthetics, Rancière proposes the idea of the distribution of the sensible, which is an 'apportionment of parts and positions… based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that deter the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution' (Rancière, 2011: 13). Then, in his view, 'politics revolves

around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time' (Rancière, 2011: 14). He advances a separation of politics, the political and policy in his essay 'Politics, identification, and subjectivization,' stating:

> the political is the encounter between two heterogeneous processes. The first process is that of governing, and it entails creating community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions. I shall call this process policy (emphasis in the original). The second process is that of equality. It consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition. The proper name for this set of practices remains emancipation. (…) [W]e can give to the process of emancipation the name of politics. I shall thus distinguish policy, politics and the political—the political being the field for the encounter between emancipation and policy in the handling of the wrong (Rancière, 1992: 58).

In Rancière's interpretation, the political is thus meant to express the tension betweengovernmentality, or, as he calls it, 'policy' or governing, and desire for emancipation. He suggests calling the latter 'politics,' which in his interpretation, relates to a set of emancipatory practices, and the actual, tangible expression of the tension which is political.

In making my own distinction between politics and the political, I would also like to draw on Chantal Mouffe's separation of the two. Mouffe, borrowing from Heidegger's vocabulary, places politics on the 'ontic' level of 'manifold practices of conventional politics' and the political to the 'ontological' way in which society is instituted. In her writings, Mouffe thus distinguishes between politics and the political:

> by 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organising human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political (Mouffe, 2005: 9).

In line with Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, in my work, too, I recognise

this separation between politics and the political, seeing the former as an organisational system of institutions, and the latter as a kind of ideological tension between governmentality or power and a drive for emancipation. Throughout this work, I address both the magazines' engagement with and coverage of politics as manifested in events, occurrences, people and institutions, on the one hand, and the presence of the political as 'the dimension of antagonism (…) constitutive of human societies' (Mouffe, 2005: 9), on the other. Before I elaborate on the specific examples of approaches to politics and the political that this work takes, I would like to address the two conceptual axes, around which the genre of the fashion magazine revolves – entertainment and consumption.

1.3 Politics, entertainment and (popular) culture

It is possible that today's spectacularisation of politics, amplified by digital media, can be traced back to the emergence of political entertainment in the 1980s in the West, underpinned by the coalescence of politics and entertainment and presentation of politics in the form of entertainment. Whereas some scholars have interpreted political entertainment as a sign of a decline in political communication (Hooghe, 2002), a more productive approach would be to see it as a direct consequence of developments in media, culture and society that inevitably lead to a transformation of how politics and the political are discussed and manifested in the media. The emergence of political entertainment points to a demand for new ways to present and discuss politics in society, where the very modes of communication and dissemination of information are dramatically changed by new technologies.

The conflation of politics and entertainment in contemporary media demonstrates the close relationship between the political and the aesthetic, which have long been recognised as intertwined categories, which shape and influence one another. The notion of the spectacularity of politics, most famously proposed by Walter Benjamin's commentary on the theatricality of fascism (Benjamin, 1979), has been widely used to analyse politicians' self-presentation (Peetz, 2021), protest movements (Cadena-Roa & Puga, 2021), and political communication and the

media, described by Shanto Iyengar as 'framers' of political values (Iyengar, 1996), which points to the aestheticising aspects of how the media work.

Unsurprisingly then, as politics has become ever more spectacularised and performative, mediatised through carefully arranged images, scripted performances and viral video snippets, political entertainment is ubiquitous, if not the very essence of politics. Equally, entertainment media have grown more politicised, as boundaries between celebrity, politics and spectacle have become blurred. The current conjuncture (the notion derived from Antonio Gramsci's work and developed and theorised by Stuart Hall to apply to the specificity of economic, political and cultural forces at a given moment (Hall, 1988)) sees a conflation of visibility, celebrity, consumption, activism and politics (Banet-Weiser & Mukherji, 2012). Celebrities have been acting as spokespeople for political and humanitarian causes, amplifying both their personal visibility and the visibility of the humanitarian cause in question (Trope, 2012); activism has been branded as a claim to fame and public approval (Hearn, 2012); and highly individualised domains such as eating or sex have increasingly become subjects of public debate and have come to serve as a host to political statements (Cairns & Johnston, 2012; Comella, 2012). It was inevitable that these tendencies would find expression in fashion magazines, which have traditionally engaged with celebrity, visibility and consumption.

1.4 Politics and consumption

The anthology *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, edited by Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, offers a comprehensive overview of how conflated politics and popular culture have become, saturated as they are with narratives of consumption, commodification and self-branding in the post-Fordist era (Banet-Weser and Mukherjee, 2012). This complex blending has to be interpreted at least to some extent in relation to the current changes in the media and, more specifically, the phenomenon of the 'economy of visibility,' facilitated by digital media and internet platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As the term implies, under the regime of the 'economy of visibility,' heightened visibility

and attention become monetisable – which, in turn, drives the production and dissemination of content and information which are sensational, controversial and simplified, and are, therefore, more likely to provoke a response from internet users or go 'viral".

The logic of the 'economy of visibility' structures presentation and self-presentation in the media and on social media platforms, favouring those modes of presentation that lend themselves to easier commodification and attract maximum user attention (Banet-Weiser, 2018). It is unsurprising then that the logics of the market and the vocabulary of advertising are employed for defining and presenting the self, or discussing and presenting politics (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Referring to Andrew Wernick's works on promotionalism, Alison Hearn (2008) writes:

> A culture marked by the ubiquity of promotional discourse is a truly postmodern one, signalled by a lack of trust in language. Here what matters most is not 'meaning' per se, or 'truth,' or 'reason,' but 'winning' – attention, emotional allegiance, and market share. Goods, corporations, and people are all implicated in promotionalism; not only are they commodified but they must also generate their own rhetorically persuasive meanings. They must become 'commodity signs' which 'function in circulation both as an object(s)-to-be- sold and as the bearer(s) of a promotional message' (Wernick, 1991: p. 16).

'Promotionalism' underpins the rising importance of branding. Commenting on the up-and-coming contemporary branded culture, Adam Arvidsson sees the power of the brand in establishing affective relationships with its consumers. Contemporary brands tend to 'interact with customers in a multiplicity of sensory, intellectual or even quasi-religious ways,' which makes brands a specific socio-cultural phenomenon of late modernity (Arvidsson, 2005). The contemporary brand is increasingly divorced from the product, and the process of branding, as it mobilises values, affect and cultural references, is employed in cultural industries, the burgeoning self-help industry and politics (Arvidsson, 2006). As brands form ever more complex moral and affective relationships with consumers, corporate responsibility becomes increasingly salient in contemporary marketing. Contemporary branding mobilises feminist discourses, discourses of diversity,

equality or environmentalism, which are presented as an important part of companies' operations, but also appear available for consumption and performative use (Castañeda, 2012; Littler, 2012). Consumption-based politics has been criticised by scholars for reducing political expression to onerous and privatised acts of shopping. Political discontent is, therefore, channeled into making an ethically informed consumer choice, rather than stimulating political coalition-building across society.

The increasing entanglement of politics and consumption is often associated with the global dominance of the neoliberal sensibility. Neoliberalism began as an economic policy, encapsulated within the idea of the self-regulating market, as famously outlined by economist Milton Friedman in his piece for *The New York Times* in September 1970 (Sorkin, 2020). Over the years, neoliberalism's foundational principles of increasing market freedom with limited possibilities for state regulation and the primacy of profit-making have come to characterise a dominant political and socio-cultural sensibility. Neoliberal subjectivity has been widely theorised as both pervasive and formative. Wendy Brown has written extensively on the 'economisation' of society, associated with neoliberalism, which permeates all spheres of life (Brown, 2003; Brown, 2015; Brown, 2019). As an all-encompassing and intrusive socio-cultural regime, neoliberal sensibility shapes feelings about the self, attitudes towards love and relationships, connections to society and social change, and political expression – through its championing of productivity, personal responsibility and freedom of choice (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Brown, 2019; Chen, 2012; Illouz, 2007; Ilouz 2012, among others). Pervasive and insidious, neoliberalism has a tendency to insinuate itself into the 'nooks and crannies of everyday life' (Littler, 2018). Neoliberal sensibility produces and sustains the belief that social change can and should occur through companies' commitment to social responsibility or customers' conscious consumption (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Thus, corporations and companies emerge as harbingers of social and political change, while consumers are cast as activists and conscious citizens, whose citizenship is negotiated through consumption (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Brough, 2012; Littler, 2012).

Equally, citizenship in the West is increasingly constructed through consumption, in which goods and products act as props in performances of civic duty or

expressions of political positions. Within the current cultural and economic context, characterised by a deteriorating welfare system and curbing of civil rights, neoliberal discourses both provoke and address anxieties around democracy, acknowledging them through corporate responsibility initiatives – one example of this is corporate 'wokeness' as a response to pervasive racism (Gill & Kanai, 2020). Such initiatives, however, can only address a limited range of issues (often being restricted to the more 'marketable' ones). The modes of address are similarly limited as they prioritise optimistic views on political and socio-cultural problems. Elsewhere, 'green consumption' emerges as an example of the performance of good citizenship (Littler, 2012), and the visible consumption of feminist-themed products signals that an individual has adopted a feminist position (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

The implications and meaning of neoliberal consumption-based politics have been widely explored in the Western context. This work addresses how the consumption of 'good' and 'conscious' products might acquire even more complex meanings outside the West, in this case, in Russia and India. Under a nationalist or autocratic regime, commodities may acquire different meanings or even emerge as ideologically laden symbols of resistance. Thus, in India, some commodities have been re-imagined as symbols of the power and virility of the nation, while other goods threaten to place their owners at risk, as they mark difference and 'otherness' – 'modest' fashion items or products that express Muslim identity do not convey belonging because they deviate from the commodity vocabulary of normative Indian-ness, as defined and articulated by the country's current Hindu fundamentalist government (Hussain & Hussein, 2018). In Russia, where expressions of queerness have been under attack, commercial products related to the Pride month offered[1] a way to associate with or support LGBTQI+ people, while also signalling the consumer's rejection of the discriminatory state policies against queerness.

[1] At the time that my analysis covers and before further criminalisation of queerness in Russia. In 2022, the state passed a ban on 'LGBT propaganda,' and in 2023, Russian Supreme Court LGBTQI+ declared 'an extremist organisation.'

1.5 Fashion magazine: Engaging with politics

It is now widely acknowledged that fashion, due to its historical association with femininity, has been a neglected realm of culture and an overlooked object of research. Similarly, the fashion magazine has long been relegated to the category of less respected media as a result of its association with femininity and trivial consumption, as well as its distance from politics and high culture. A number of works analysing fashion magazines see their function as a fabrication of fantasy, describing their detachment from reality and their production of unrealistic scenarios as genre-defining aspects of fashion media. The latter have been seen as realms of magic and enchantment, providing women with escapist respite from their daily lives (Moeran, 2015). Traditionally, fashion magazines for women fall under the category of entertainment media, historically dismissed as distracting, useless and even harmful – in line with the position adopted by the Frankfurt School on mass communication media (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). Throughout the larger part of the 20th century, entertainment media have been viewed as a hinderance to education and active political involvement, distracting media consumers from becoming active citizens and claiming the time that could instead be spent on (self-)education and betterment (Putnam, 2000).

A more discerning view on fashion media developed in the second half of the 20th century, rooted in Sociology, Gender Studies, Popular Culture Studies, Popular Media Studies and Fashion Studies, it invites more nuanced views on popular culture. One of the early examples of an enquiring approach to fashion magazines is Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of the vocabulary of fashion magazines, which draws on a closer reading of the fashion magazine as a source of knowledge about society, beliefs and values (Barthes, 1990). In 1960s Britain, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, spearheaded by Stuart Hall, proposed and developed a novel approach to entertainment media as bearers of ideology, approaching entertainment and popular media as 'a major cultural and ideological force, standing in a dominant position to the way in which social relations and political problems are defined and the production and transformation of popular ideologies in the audiences addressed' (Hall, Hobson & Lowe, 2003). Coincidentally, one of the earliest research projects at the Centre, conducted by

Janice Winship (1987), was concerned with women's magazines and their representation of femininity.

Since the second half of the 20th century, mainstream fashion magazines for women have been garnering more attention in academia, acquiring a new status as a relevant source of knowledge about femininity and how it is discussed, positioned and situated within society, while also prompting questions about consumerism and citizenship (Gill, 2018). Lifestyle magazines tend to address the 'imagined communities' of readers, as Angela McRobbie argues in her study of the readership of women's magazines, re-purposing Benedict Anderson's term (McRobbie, 1999; Anderson, 1983). McRobbie argues that magazines' audiences are 'imagined communities' insofar as they consist of readers whose demographic characteristics, such as age and income, serve as powerful incentives to advertisers, while also dictating the choice of themes, editorial angle, textual and visual vocabulary. The methods used by these magazines to connect to their readers and how they articulate the social and cultural values relevant for their readers have made fashion magazines for women valuable objects of sociological research. Research conducted by sociologists, feminist and media scholars shows magazines for women as vessels for identity politics (for some examples, see Twigg, 2018; Winship, 1987), agents of progressive change (Keller, 2020) and arbiters of values (Stoever, 2006).

In Fashion Studies, the definition offered by Agnes Rocamora recognises the importance of the role played by fashion publications in transmitting knowledge and values, describing them as 'cultural intermediaries' (Rocamora, 2009). Rocamora's definition sees a key function of fashion magazines as the assignment and creation of value and cultural cachet. Their role as 'cultural intermediaries' is exemplified by their authoritative tone – they do not just recommend, they command their readers to 'try,' 'watch,' 'indulge,' or 'update' (wardrobes or beauty rituals). The magazines sustain their authority by seemingly discovering everything that is new and cutting-edge, which is manifested their penchant for sensationalist claims.

Whereas politics is clearly present in fashion magazines, one question that naturally arises is how politics and the political are manifested in these publications.

As John Street suggests, entertainment media express the political either by representing politics or by revealing politics (Street, 2012) (this distinction might also be interpreted to refer to the differences between politics on the institutional level and the political on the ideological level, which are outlined above). Representing politics, in Street's view, means explicitly discussing, criticising and interpreting political institutions, measures and actors. But revealing politics relates to the underlying ideology, wherein ideological perspectives are expressed through judgements, evaluations and discourses, which 'reveal' values and attitudes. Both concepts – representing and revealing politics – are the subject of this work, as it analyses how the publications deliberate on actual political events and political actors, but also discusses the political meanings behind the discourses employed in the magazines, as well as their modes of portraying personalities and events.

Fashion magazines' relationship with politics remains a largely under-researched domain. Some of the most notable research works on women's fashion magazines by Janice Winship (1987), Ros Ballaster (1991), Ellen McCracken (1993) and Brooke Erin Duffy (2013) underscore the incompatibility of the genre of the fashion magazine and political discussion, while recognising the deep-seated ideology of the magazines. Fashion magazines for women have been influential in establishing standards for an understanding of femininity, women's role in family and society, as well as prescribing and disciplining normative behaviour in relation to women's appearance, appropriateness, manners and conduct. Fashion magazines, thus, may be understood as an instrument of what Foucault calls 'biopolitics.' Prescribing methods for surveilling, adjusting and modifying femininity, fashion magazines exemplify the Foucaultian idea of technologies of the self (Delhaye, 2006). In his lecture on biopolitics and governmentality, Foucault (1988) defines technologies of the self as techniques that

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault, 1988: n.p.).

Such exigencies of right conduct are ideological, as they are underpinned by

workings of power.

However, if fashion magazines for women are an instrument of governmentality, their disciplining power is masked within the notions of pleasure, joy, happiness and intimacy. Magazines for women develop relationships with women (Winship, 1987), forging what Rosalind Gill (2009) and Laura Favaro (2017) have referred to as 'mediated intimacy' – the appearance of a warm and well-meaning presence that helps women navigate femininity. Alice Winch's (2012) concept of a 'girlfriend gaze' is also helpful to explicate the seemingly amicable, yet scrutinising gaze that women's magazines direct at their readers.

However, even though ideology is ever-present in women's fashion media, the latter does not have a rich or long history of self-consciously engaging with issues of ideology or politics. Brooke Erin Duffy (2013) connects this lack of reflexivity with the magazines' orientation towards consumption, which, editorially, has been seen as incompatible with serious and potentially bleak topics. In her study on the history of fashion magazines, Ros Ballaster (1991) links the absence of political discussion in mainstream fashion magazines with their promotion of conservative and reactionary values and views on femininity. In her book on women's magazines, Janice Winship (1987) lists some of the typical features of the genre, arising from its association with traditional femininity and focus on consumption. Among such genre-specific features are the sentimentalising tone, upbeat and positive mood, and omnipresence of dreamy and imaginative scenarios, which help the reader disassociate from their everyday life. Whereas fashion magazines strive to produce a recognisable editorial voice to create consistency across texts and visuals (Duffy, 2013; Winship, 1987), a number of scholars of fashion media have also commented on their characteristic inconsistency and the contradictions in their writing (Ballaster, 1991; Tse, 2016). These genre characteristics potentially limit the media's nuanced engagement with serious political and social issues.

Fashion magazines' turn towards politics, in which they engage with political commentary, openly support or refute political issues and endorse or renounce political actors, is a seemingly new phenomenon which has absorbed the effects of consumer citizenship, post-feminism and popular feminism. Scholars have examined this turn to politics with a certain degree of ambiguity – Jennifer Lynn

Stoever (2006) has addressed the incompatibility of a glossy magazine like *Marie Claire* covering global women's rights activism, exposing the Orientalist, neocolonial mode, in which 'Third World' women are represented in the publication. Elsewhere, Jessalynn Keller (2020) and Natalie Coulter and Kristine Moruzi (2022) praise *Teen Vogue* for its thoughtful engagement with political matters, from intersectional feminism to the current political agenda in the US.

One of the most widely theorised political aspects of fashion magazines for women are their attitudes to being a woman, their interpretations of femininity and feminism. Engagement with 'women's world' (Ballaster, 1991) and the reality of being a woman is at the core of the mainstream fashion magazine, which, historically, is a markedly gendered genre. In my work, in order to interpret the magazines' relationship with woman-ness and feminism, I employ notions of 'post- feminism' (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2016), 'neoliberal feminism' (Rottenberg, 2017), 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Before I move on to discussing the structure of the work, I would like to elaborate on these terms, which I refer to in the course of my research.

1.6 The feminisms of women's fashion magazines

The attitudes of women's magazines to feminism have been a focal point of a number of research works on magazines. Some of the seminal 20th century research works on women's magazines characterise the magazines' attitudes to feminism as either indifferent or outright negative. Janice Winship (1987) discusses her ambivalent feelings about women's magazines, born out of her discomfort, as a feminist, about their traditionalist and conservative take on women's cultural and societal roles. Ros Ballaster (1991) and Ellen McCracken (1993) see women's magazines as outright anti-feminist and undermining the feminist gains of the 1970s and '80s, as they embrace conservative family values and traditional gender norms, presenting women as mothers and wives, purveyors of beauty and fashion, consumers – but not political subjects.

Currently, however, fashion magazines' attitudes to feminism and woman-ness are much more complex, reflecting the shift in cultural attitudes towards women's

role in society and feminism that have occurred since the early 2000s, also influenced by intertwined shifts in politics, society and the economy. The first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed, firstly, a widespread rejection of feminist values in the form of post-feminism, which, in the early 2000s rested on the claim that gender equality had already been achieved and the feminist movement was therefore redundant.

The claim of post-feminism, which clearly sets it apart from the feminist activism of the 20th century, is that equality has already been achieved, inviting women to freely choose to enjoy their femininity (McRobbie, 2004). The concepts of choice and freedom mask the acceptance of patriarchal gender norms, and also accommodate the heightened 'surveillance, monitoring and disciplining' of femininity (Chen, 2012; Gill, 2016). The focus on the freedom of personal choice exemplifies the neoliberal endorsement of individuality and individual success. Eva Chen offers a succinct characterisation of the neoliberal idea of freedom:

> (...) instead of the traditional humanist definition of unlimited, universalised and absolute freedom, neoliberal choice refers to one's ability to choose maximum material gain and profit in order to construct one's own self, and agency now means the ability to be active in this materialistic, profitable self-actualising project. Rather than viewing freedom as an ultimate and yet-to-be-reached goal, neoliberalism posits a new type of subject as already free and rational, a homo economicus who freely deliberates every action based on a rational cost–benefit calculation. Reflecting the marketisation of all areas of human life, including the construction of the human subject, this new form of governance dispenses with morality or ethics in the traditional sense, and places them squarely in the responsibility which the individual must shoulder for their own marketised choices. Thus freedom as a new type of 'positive freedom' or positive governance, is never complete freedom from power, but the active ability to respond to power and the autonomous ability to realise one's potential through one's own efforts and active choice (Chen, 2012: p. 443, emphasis in the original).

Gradually, the early post-feminist repudiation of feminism has been replaced by a seemingly enthusiastic endorsement and celebration of feminism and women's empowerment. These shifting attitudes to feminism are associated with a rise and evolution of the post-feminist sensibility as well as emergence of spectacular and palatable feminisms. In feminist studies, post-feminism has been described as a meandering, contradictory and complex set of claims and beliefs, which is why

researchers have suggested the broader notion of 'sensibility' (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020). While acknowledging feminism and selectively incorporating its values and parlance, post-feminism also repudiates it (Gill, 2007; Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2004; McRobbie, 2009).

A resurgence of feminism in the 2010s and early 2020s intensified discussions around feminism and post-feminism, as expressions of feminism have seemingly not only become ubiquitous in media, but are now also shown in a positive light, celebrated and proudly announced by women (Gill, 2016; Rottenberg, 2013; Rottenberg, 2017). Catherine Rottenberg (2017) suggests that many such expressions should be viewed as quintessentially neoliberal, inasmuch they root feminist empowerment in a 'promise of future individual fulfilment, careful sequencing of career and maternity and smart (self-)investments in the present to ensure enhanced returns in the future' (Rottenberg, 2017: n.p.). These expressions are also highly exclusionary and channel the 'unapologetically middle-class feminism, shorn of all obligations to less privileged women or to those who are not "strivers"' (McRobbie, 2013: p. 120). Rosalind Gill (2016) notes that the post-feminist acceptance of individual success tends to incorporate and render harmless the language of feminist protest and intersectionality, allowing post-feminism to shift, change and appeal to larger groups of women.

In her analysis of highly visible expressions of feminism in media and on social media, Sarah Banet-Weiser proposes the term 'popular feminism' (2018). In her view, the visibility and attention that 'popular feminism' generates has become a goal in itself. The affordances of social and popular media give preference to feminisms that are spectacular or sensationalist, but, ultimately, palatable, or as Catherine Rottenberg (2017) says, 'accommodating.' Performed by celebrities and visibilised through platform algorithms, expressions of 'popular feminism' have limited capacity to challenge and disrupt the power structures and inequalities engrained in culture and society, and they also, as noted above, afford limited inclusion, prioritising the experiences of already 'empowered' women (affluent, white, middle-class, etc.). Such limitations and 'palatability' of popular feminisms determine their preference for celebratory, 'happy narratives' (which I explore in detail in the Chapter 4 of this work).

Strikingly, most of the recent scholarly discussions on post-feminism, popular feminism or neoliberal feminism are situated in and refer to Western contexts. This imbalance has been criticised as limiting and inadequate by, most notably, Simidele Dosekun (2020), whose work on spectacular femininity addresses post-feminism in Lagos, Nigeria with a focus on affluent upper-middle and middle-class women who embrace post-feminist femininity from the position of empowered, financially independent subjects, disrupting local gender norms by affirming their spectacular femininities. Similarly, Fauzia Husain discusses the advent of post-feminism in Pakistan facilitated by liberalisation that has given 'rise to irresolvable cultural dilemmas for middle-class women, requiring that they signify religious nationality and sexual modesty on the one hand and middle-class material success and postfeminist sexual autonomy on the other' (Husain, 2020: p. 630).

Women's fashion magazines have been recognised as key communicators of post- feminist sensibility, neoliberal and spectacular feminisms (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Favaro, 2017). In my work, I take note of the many expressions of post-feminism and popular feminism in women's magazines across locations and cultures, while also registering the slippages, inconsistencies and nuances in their approaches to feminisms.

1.7 Aims and scope of research

This research favours Stuart Hall's (1987) conjunctural approach, focusing on representations of politics and the political in fashion media at this particular cultural and historical moment. The research acknowledges the phenomenon of fashion media's current politicisation and focuses on the qualitative aspects of the relationship between politics and fashion and lifestyle media, asking questions about how politics and the political are manifested in such media, and how they affect the content of fashion and lifestyle publications. In focusing on these questions, the present study seeks to gain an understanding of what is unique and characteristic of fashion media's political coverage, it delineates the parameters of political coverage in fashion media, and offers an insight into the current

politicisation of fashion and lifestyle magazines as a media genre.

Clearly, modes of engagement with politics and the political differ from publication to publication, influenced by the approach of individual editors, authors and photographers. In this work, however, I seek to capture mainstream fashion magazines for women in the current conjuncture, and how they are influenced by changes in media, politics and culture on the global as well as local levels.

1.8 Methodology

This research employs critical discourse analysis, which proves the most effective approach due to its understanding of language as ideological. In critical discourse analysis, 'discourse' is understood as 'use of language conceived as social practice' (Fairclough, 1993) or a 'form of social behaviour' (Wodak, 1996), in which both definitions acknowledge the situatedness of discourses in culture and society and their direct connection to a wider cultural context. After Norman Fairclough (2012; 2013), I understand discourses as 'semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world (physical, social or mental), which can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors' (Fairclough, 2013: p.180). As Ruth Wodak and Norman Fairclough write elsewhere, discourses are in a constant dynamic relationship with society and culture, both being shaped by political and cultural realities and shaping them:

> Critical discourse analysis sees discourse — language use in speech and writing — as a form of !social practice"$ Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it. A dialectical relationship is a two-way relationship: the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them (Fairclough & Wodak 1997: 55).

Therefore, critical discourse analysis acknowledges that discourses relate to power, expressing and shaping it, and that they are always in flux, adapting to or defying the workings of power.

The methods of critical discourse analysis are quintessentially interpretative and explanatory (Wodak, 1996; Fairclough, 1995), and always look beyond

a concrete text. This research draws on Fairclough's understanding of CDA as both theory and method, rooted in the interpretation of context beyond the text (Fairclough 1995). In my research, I follow Fairclough's advice to 'go outside the text' and use 'academic and non-academic sources' (Fairclough, 2001: 128) to interpret discourse. Throughout my work, I rely on the methodology, elaborated by Fairclough, which suggests a two-tier approach to discourse analysis – analysis of content and form at the textual level (Fairclough 1992: 193) and analysis of links between text and social practice. After Fairclough (2013: 179), I use 'discourse' to refer to: '(1) the language associated with a particular social field or practice (e.g., "political discourse")', and '(2) a way of construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective (e.g., a "neoliberal discourse of globalization")'.

Critical discourse analysis is an unapologetically political approach dedicated to a critical questioning of dominant discourses and to exposing how these work to sustain power and dominance. In this research, I look at dominant discourses that pertain to politics and the political in fashion and lifestyle magazines, identifying and explaining their connections to politics and society. In each chapter, I address dominant discourses in fashion magazines (on feminism, diversity, national identity, etc.) seeking to establish how publications write about them, addressing the semantic aspects of content and form (Fairclough, 1993), and also to contextualise them within broader social and political realities.

In each chapter, I establish a cluster of topics, which are prominent in the public life and politics of the country at hand, explaining their relevance and describing the general media discourse around them. I then go on to describe the discourses on the topics in the fashion publications chosen for analysis, commenting on differences in the publications' approaches. Relying on existing research in cultural studies, media studies, feminist and postcolonial studies, I establish connections between the discourses proliferating in lifestyle media and phenomena in culture, society and history. I continuously refer to the contours of the fashion magazine as a genre (elaborated above) to establish the ways in which the publications' commentary on politics and the political either conform with or deviate from the formal characteristics of the genre, and how the genre coherence of the fashion magazine is either sustained or disrupted.

My work has involved detailed examination of the following magazines – the Indian publications *Vogue*, *Elle* and *Verve*; the Russian ones *Vogue*, *Marie Claire* and *The Blueprint*; and the US publications *Vogue*, *Teen Vogue* and *Refinery29*. Of these publications, six have printed editions as well as websites (these are *Vogue US*, *Vogue India*, *Vogue Russia*, *Marie Claire Russia*, *Verve* and *Elle India*), and three circulate online (*The Blueprint*, *Teen Vogue* and *Refinery29*). Most of them address middle-class women in ages between 25 – 45, *Teen Vogue* targets young adults, *The Blueprint* and *Refinery29* are oriented towards millennial women readers. Whereas all three *Vogue* magazines, at the time of my analysis, are managed by the global publishing house Condé Nast; two publications – *Verve* and *The Blueprint* – are operated locally; *Elle India* and *Marie Claire Russia* are local franchises of international titles; *Refinery29* is an international platform with a number of local websites across North America, Australia and Europe.

For my analysis, I used each title's published output for a 12–15-month period, reading all of the magazines' print issues within the selected timeframe, as well as monitoring the publications' online content and using a textual search function to identify relevant content across each website. For each chapter, I started with a close reading of the publications' printed issues and online texts, which allowed me to identify recurring themes and tropes. In total, I selected and analysed 66 issues of fashion and lifestyle magazines and more than 300 online texts for this work, from which I singled out various examples to discuss further, interpret and situate within wider media, cultural and political contexts. Although textual analysis forms the backbone of this study, where relevant, I also analysed images from a critical discursive standpoint that emphasises the embeddedness of visuality in culture and society and examines how images construct accounts of the social world (Rose, 2023).

Throughout my examination of the magazines' texts, I continued to monitor the political events and discourses in the countries analysed, and also compiled theoretical literature and scholarly research related to the political themes relevant in the context of each country. I used these scholarly and media texts to interpret the tropes and themes within the fashion magazines and to situate the magazines' discourses within larger global and local political contexts, exposing their ideological and political aspects.

1.9 The structure and content of the research

The second chapter of the present research focuses on India and demonstrates how three selected fashion magazines – *Vogue India*, *Verve* and *Elle India* – grapple with some of the crucial issues in Indian politics. The two key issues addressed in the chapter are the rise of Hindu nationalism and the role of women in Indian society. The chapter explores how fashion media make sense of global discourses on feminism and inclusivity in relation to the anti-minority and anti-feminist policies of the Indian state.

Chapter 3 concentrates on women's mainstream fashion publications in Russia, inquiring whether fashion media could emerge as a site of political resistance and demonstrating how precarious the political engagement of fashion media may become in the context of an authoritarian state. Drawing on examples from *Vogue Russia*, online publication *The Blueprint* and *Marie Claire Russia*, the chapter offers insight into how the use of global discourses on diversity may offer the magazines an opportunity to express their resistance to and defiance of the politics of the state. The chapter looks specifically at how association with the West provides the publications with a means of expressing their values and their view on the politics of the Russian state. In Russian fashion magazines, discourses on the West are pivotal, pointing to the fraught relationship between Russia and the West. Russia's attitude to the West is constructed in terms of antagonism inherited from the Soviet times and re-articulated by the current government. This work thus probes and interrogates the attitudes towards Western-ness conveyed in the aforementioned fashion magazines.

The study also addresses the conditions for the emergence of mainstream fashion media for women, as a genre, in India and Russia, respectively. In India, consumer fashion magazines appeared as a side effect of the liberalisation reforms of the 1990s that limited state intervention in the economy, widening the Indian population's access to consumption and prompting rapid growth of young middle classes in the country, at the same time strengthening of nationalist sentiment. In Russia, too, mainstream fashion magazines for women are a product of the 1990s, with their emergence being preceded by the collapse of the Soviet Union, liberalisation of the Russian economy and democratic reforms signalling Russia's

new openness to the West. Initially, the function of Indian and Russian fashion magazines was primarily educational as they were meant to teach new consumers about global fashion trends, introduce them to global designers and encourage consumption (Brosius, 2010; Bartlett, 2006).

US women's fashion and lifestyle media, which is the subject of the fourth chapter, have a much longer history, however. By the end of the 19th century, US women's fashion and lifestyle magazines had gained considerable popularity and impact, and it would be no exaggeration to say they were genre-defining. Many US media companies are global corporations that are single-handedly or in conjunction with local companies responsible for media launches across global markets, offering a uniform operational model. *Condé Nast* is one such corporation, operating in the USA and India and, until recently, also in Russia. The international presence of such media companies is part of the globalisation phenomenon that, in the 1990s and 2000s, both in India and Russia, was widely decried as 'Americanisation.' The term 'Americanisation,' while encapsulating fears of American domination more generally, also hints at a dominance of cultural trends originating from the US, which is feared will replace and eliminate local culture. Whereas this unease about Americanisation has largely been dismissed for its simplistic take on complex globalisation processes (Appadurai, 1990), the discourses surrounding the phenomenon still epitomise the major influence the US has in the fields of politics and popular culture. Not insignificantly, US media companies and lifestyle publications have been seminal in setting the tone for publications across the globe. Thus, the powerhouse *Condé Nast*, which manages international titles in over 30 markets, runs its operations out of New York and has been working to unify its content strategy under the leadership of the global content advisor Anna Wintour, who is also the editor-in-chief of *Vogue US*. According to online publication *Fashion United*, Wintour entered her new role in 2019 to 'advise the executive leadership team on global content opportunities and act as a resource to editors-in-chief and editorial talent worldwide' (Hughes, 2019).

Indisputably, throughout the period from the 2010s to the 2020s, a number of important cultural, media and political trends originated from the US, whose cultural influence has been bolstered by its media superpower and the global

outreach of its major digital and tech companies. The fourth chapter focuses in more detail on the scope and character of neoliberal discourses in the US publications. Underpinned by a retraction of the welfare state and the increasing involvement of private companies in politics and society, neoliberal sensibility has a far-reaching influence on both public and private spheres of life. An insidious regime that permeates the public and the private, neoliberalism dictates behavioural and cultural norms, emotional regimes (Elias & Gill, 2014) and patterns of self-presentation (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2022).

The fourth chapter of this study looks in detail at the co-optation of the political within the neoliberal discourses of fashion publications. The content of the fashion magazines that I analyse – *Vogue US*, *Teen Vogue* and *Refinery29* – is not only overtly political, but also decidedly liberal. These publications support the agenda of the US Democratic Party, as they are largely aligned with it on the issues of human rights, race, women's rights and violence. But in addition to speaking about politics, they also – to use John Street's term – *reveal* politics, as they display contradictions between calls to civic engagement and the celebration of private political participation through social media visibility or consumption. They tend to glorify the figure of the consumer citizen, express support for women's rights in a popular feminist or post-feminist manner (Banet-Weiser, 2012), and they advocate sustainability, while encouraging consumption. In the fourth chapter, I examine in more detail the prevalence of neoliberal discourses in fashion magazines, which co-opt politics and political talk on equality and rights.

A sharper focus on the ideological aspects of the magazines in this chapter allows me to address the issue of the insidiousness of neoliberal discourses that undermine and limit the scope and seriousness of political discourses and discussions in contemporary fashion magazines for women. In the conclusion to this work, I would also like to address how neoliberal values are adopted and read differently across the publications analysed. Adopting, along the lines of Wendy Brown (2015), an understanding of neoliberalism as a global sensibility, in the conclusion, I will look into how it diffuses across cultural contexts, discussing its different interpretations and possible resistance to it across publications.

1.10 Selection of fashion magazines and timeline for analysis

This work looks at a total of nine fashion publications. All selected magazines are mainstream and widely published, which ensures that a larger number of people can have access to them, but also means that the opinions they express are comparatively widespread within society. Most of the selected publications address middle-class women. Arguably, the presence of a middle or upper-class upwardly mobile readership is a precondition for the success of a fashion magazine, as such readers would be expected to embrace conspicuous consumption and aspirational shopping. However, the different conditions for 'middle classness' across the countries and the different socio-cultural meanings of being middle class in India, Russia and the US also provide me with the opportunity to assess the differences in the magazines' approaches towards discussing politics and the political.

Although the texts selected for the analysis were published between late 2019 and early 2023, that is throughout the duration of my research project, each chapter focuses on a specific period of time in more detail. In the final work, the chapters are organised chronologically. Thus, the second chapter on Indian fashion magazines concentrates on texts from the end of 2019 until early 2021, the time when the Indian government adopted its infamous Citizenship Act, emboldening anti-Muslim sentiment in India and provoking student' protests. This also covers the period of time during which the state's inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic left migrant workers and members of socially disadvantaged communities without state financial support and ever more vulnerable both to the virus and to poverty. The chapter brings together the magazines' discourses on inclusion and diversity.

The third chapter, dedicated to Russian fashion publications, spans the years from 2021 through the beginning of 2022 and documents the final months of their comparatively unrestrained operation before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The war has tragically upended the lives of millions of Ukrainian people, inflicted thousands of casualties, and caused seismic changes around the world. Concomitant with increased political repression within Russia, the Ukraine war also radically transformed Russia's cultural institutions and

discourses. Thus, in March 2022, the Russian government passed a bill approving property confiscation for the spreading of what it calls 'fakes' about the Russian army, effectively banning any criticism of the war, and declared social networks Instagram and Facebook extremist. In the wake of these measures, a number of international companies, including *Vogue*'s publisher Condé Nast, halted their operations in Russia. This chapter looks at the magazines' attempts to conceptualise themselves in relation to the values and discourses promoted by the state.

Lastly, the fourth chapter looks at fashion publications in the US, focusing on the timespan between the end of 2020 and the end of 2022. While Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election held the promise of a return to 'normal' politics, US society remains deeply divided and polarised, and distrust of the media and elites is ubiquitous, especially among the country's Republican constituency. The reasons for the current polarisation have been the subject of social and media studies (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), and the recent examples from the USA show how reluctant strong supporters of a particular political party are to question their already established beliefs and affiliations. What such reactions might be pointing to are deep-seated discontent, a sense of disillusionment and chronic mistrust. As I engage with the discourses in the US fashion magazines, I look at their ideology, focusing more on the co-optations of political talk in neoliberal discourses. The chapter thus highlights the implications of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), the devaluation of the political meaning of 'community,' the political impotence of the 'happy narratives' in fashion magazines as well as the modes of representation they use. Given the trendsetting role maintained by fashion media in the US, many of the findings outlined in the fourth chapter are also relevant for understanding Russian and Indian magazines. In light of this role, a detailed analysis of the ideological aspects of its discourses is of twofold importance. Firstly, it allows us to see global tendencies in the political attitudes within the fashion media. Secondly, it presents what appears to be an international standard for political talk within fashion magazines.

The chosen timeline for analysis reflects the sequence of my work on the chapters. The chapter on Indian fashion media was the first one I wrote, followed by my analysis of Russian fashion publications and, lastly, the chapter on the US fashion media. After long deliberation, I decided to preserve this sequence.

Firstly, the fact that the chapters concentrate on different periods of time does not diminish the relevance of the issues each chapter addresses – I have continued to monitor the Indian, Russian and US fashion media throughout the duration of my research and I am certain that the issues each chapter discusses remain representative both of the publications' position and state of affairs in the selected countries. Secondly, coincidentally, each of the chosen timelines coincided with some of the critical events and occurrences that exposed the polarisation and crises within the three societies, as the passages above demonstrate.

While the second and third chapters demonstrate the actual engagement of fashion magazines with politics and the political, but also imply the limitations of such engagement, the fourth chapter points to the possible reasons why this engagement might be limited, rooted in genre's embrace of optimism and fantasy as well as its celebration of conspicuous consumption. It explores how these aspects of fashion journalism appear to be misaligned with fashion media's turn to politics and how they might hinder genuine and critical engagement with politics and the political.

In this work, I aim to reveal the contradictions and ambivalence in the engagement of fashion magazines with politics and the political. I argue that this is generally indicative of the profound entanglement of politics, culture, celebrity, branding and visibility at this cultural conjuncture, marking a deeply conflictual state of culture, a fluctuating media genre and pointing to changes in political communication. The contradictions, limitations and changes in fashion media's engagement with politics and the political manifest an evolution of the genre and also raise questions about the future of entertainment media and political commentary as well as the importance of visibility for political communication in the years to come.