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Perspectives from India, Russia and the USA

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CHAPTER FOUR:

Corporate and personal responsibility.

Political discourses in the U.S. fashion publications [13]

4.1 Introduction

From the viral op-ed on President Trump in *Teen Vogue* (Duca, 2016) to the much-discussed editorial featuring Kamala Harris in *Vogue US* (Okeowo, 2021), extensive coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement and #MeToo across lifestyle and fashion titles – politics is prominent in fashion and lifestyle magazines in the US. Moreover, as US lifestyle and fashion media are situated at the vanguard of global popular culture, they are setting standards for publications around the globe, leading by example, as they cover political issues. Frequently described, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as the source and driver of cultural globalisation (tellingly, often referred to as 'Americanisation' (Appadurai, 1990)), the US has served as a launchpad for global discourses on politics, culture and society over the past few decades. The conversations on #MeToo and anti-racism, which began in the US, have gained momentum across the globe (Ghadery, 2019; Dijk, 2021), widely featuring in fashion and lifestyle magazines the world over – as the previous chapters on India and Russia demonstrate. The US is also home to a number of international publishing houses – notably, the headquarters of Condé Nast and Hearst are in New York, which contributes to the international impact of US American socio-cultural and political trends.

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[13] Parts of this chapter are based on Solomatina, I. (2024). Happy narratives: stories of compulsory success in contemporary fashion and lifestyle publications for women. Feminist Media Studies, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2341419

This cultural eminence of US fashion and lifestyle publications makes it seminal to understand the political discourses of this country's lifestyle media in order to evaluate the trends and tendencies in lifestyle media around the globe. In this chapter, I focus on politics and the political in three titles – *Vogue US*, *Teen Vogue* and *Refinery29*. Applying a discursive analytical approach, I identify dominant themes and discourses in these three publications, examining their political significance and their political implications. The chapter draws on over a year of printed and digital output of the publications, relying specifically on content published between January 2021 and October 2022. The selected time period includes some of the most turbulent moments in the recent history of US democracy, spanning the aftershocks of Donald Trump's presidency, the 6 January Capitol attack and the increasing polarisation of US society across partisan lines, in which 'wokeness' and the underlying discussions of feminism and gender, race and racism, diversity and inclusion have become crucial (Goldberg, 2023). This period also saw Russia invade Ukraine and NATO allies come together in a bid to support Ukraine's independence. The impact of these events has reverberated across US culture and has been addressed by US lifestyle publications.

The chapter is divided into several sections. I begin with a brief overview of the history of fashion and lifestyle publications in the US, thereafter introducing the three specific publications this chapter focuses on. I then turn to the political discourses in US media. Firstly, I address the discourse of 'us,' which reflects the publications' perspectives on the USA and its current state of polarisation. Then I address the neoliberal discourses on corporate responsibility, self-branding and authenticity, and personal success. Critically reflecting on the phenomenon of 'personalised politics' (Bennet, 2012) in neoliberal times, this chapter demonstrates how responsibility for promoting sustainability, equality and racial justice is placed squarely on consumers and producers (fashion and beauty brands, designers), who are supposed to take on the roles of educators, social benefactors and political actors and do the 'necessary work' for political change (Brough, 2012; Gill & Kanai, 2020). The chapter then addresses the modes of personal representation in magazines. In line with the neoliberal relegation of political responsibility to individuals and corporations – rather than the state or organised political movements – lifestyle publications blur the lines between

politics and glamour as they feature fashion and pop cultural figures as political activists, or portray politicians as fashion icons.

4.2 U.S. fashion publications: A brief history

Unlike the disparate histories of lifestyle media in India and Russia, discussed in the previous chapters, the USA has long been at the forefront of the newest developments in fashion and lifestyle media. That said, compared with the European print culture, the history of the magazine in the US is itself rather new. Following the history of US print magazines from the mid-18th to the end of the 19th century, Heather Haveman notes that the first American magazines to appear in the 18th century were published in different languages, had negligible circulation and were printed within and for local communities, as settlements were scattered across the rural country with limited connection among them (Haveman, 2015). In the late 18th/early 19th century, magazine printing was a booming, albeit expensive and unprofitable enterprise with a profusion of titles for the general reader and a few specialised publications. Although their success was uncertain, the abundance of magazine titles was instigated by rapid urbanisation as well as a dynamic political climate across the states. Haveman remarks that magazines tended to campaign for various causes and offers a striking account of the issues they campaigned for:

> [R]eformers in this era also agitated to eradicate an amazingly wide (and sometimes bizarre) array of other social ills: reforming prostitutes and seamen; promoting the rights of women and workers; helping the blind, the deaf and dumb, the insane, debtors, paupers, orphans, widows, Indians, and free blacks; advocating free love, nonviolence, prison reform, phonetic spelling, dress reform, more frequent bathing, manual labor for seminarians, and vegetarianism; and crusading against war, capital punishment, cockfighting, dueling, fighting, bullbaiting, swearing, tobacco, tea and coffee, novels, theater, card playing, and gambling (Haveman, 2015: p. 187).

Women's magazines in 19th century USA were dedicated to homemaking, fashion and manners, but also suffrage, feminism and women's rights. Between 1849 and 1859, the suffragist Amelia Bloomer was running her popular newspaper *Lily*, edited by and printed for women. Bloomer used *Lily* to campaign for

women's rights and, among other things, to advertise bloomers – her eponymous bifurcated trouser-like garment.

Since the end of the 19th century, US magazines and publishing houses, fuelled by public demand for – and the economic success of – specialised publications, have been transforming into international and, later, global enterprises. Tellingly, *Vogue*, founded in 1892 in the USA, grew into an international brand with several European editions, of which *Vogue France* (launched in 1904) was the earliest. Today, its parent publishing house Condé Nast manages a multi-branch family of global titles comprising both print and digital media.

The proliferation of fashion and lifestyle media in the USA should be understood in connection with the mass consumption and mass culture that have always been inherent parts of US culture (Arnold, 2008; Lebovic, 2019). Mass production and sporty, uniform fashions were specific to the US American fashion industry in the 1930s and 1940s (Arnold, 2008; Arnold, 2021), and American fashion media, while seeking to educate readers about European fashion, also promoted the characteristically utilitarian American styles, inspired by sports and dance.

The German aggression in Europe and beginning of the Second World War in the late 1930s/early 1940s further spurred the development of US American fashion media. As Europe was torn apart by the war, the influence of the European and, in particular, Parisian fashion diminished, and contact between American and European fashion press declined (Kurkdjian, 2020). Throughout the 1940s, the unique and original identity of American fashion consolidated around the concepts of sportswear and mass production. Moreover, the influx of European artists, art directors, journalists and photographers, fleeing the war, enriched and diversified the US fashion industry, helping the country's fashion and lifestyle media refine its voice and visual language (Krause-Wahl, 2015).

In the 1950s–1960s, during the US economic boom, fashion magazines sought to adapt to the consumers' increasingly sophisticated tastes and need for individualisation (Lebovic, 2013; Morin, 2018). Fashion and lifestyle media became ever more diversified and endeavoured to engage with the growing number of new categories of middle-class, upwardly mobile working-class, and Black consumers

(Ouellette, 1999; West, 2020). The rich and varied history of lifestyle publications in the US, as well as their international influence, means that they enjoy well-honed and time-honoured traditions of fashion writing – these are fashion magazines *par excellence*. Unlike the Indian or Russian fashion magazines discussed in the previous chapters, which, in the 1990s, had to find the right vocabulary and tone to write about fashion, contemporary US fashion magazines faced no such challenge. On the contrary, located at the heart of the Western world, they are the epitome of the contemporary fashion magazine, drawing on a rich tradition of fashion and fluent in the jargon of fashion, much of which they themselves helped establish.

Over the years, US lifestyle and fashion magazines have absorbed and initiated change, responding to shifts in social structures and consumption patterns. Firmly anchored in US mass and popular culture, fashion and lifestyle media have upheld, but also subverted the norms of identity construction. They have both internalised and defined normative expressions of social and cultural identities through gender, race, class and age. Thus, *Ebony*, a monthly magazine which addresses Black Americans and writes about Black experiences, has been described as a powerful tool of identity formation for African Americans, negotiating Blackness, sexuality and politics (Clarke & Mosleh, 2015; West, 2020). Elsewhere, Laurie Ouellette (1999) has demonstrated how, in the 1970s, *Cosmopolitan* magazine initiated working-class women in the American dream, training them in aspirational consumption behaviour.

In light of the sweeping changes in the media, brought about by the rise of social media and an ostensible crisis of print media, long-established fashion publications have been embracing change, adapting to the continuously shifting media landscape. *Vogue US* remains one of the world's most widely read fashion publications. According to the publisher's data, around eight million people read its print version, 17 million its online publication, and the *Vogue US* social media channels attract 64 million followers (Vogue US Media Kit, 2024). The magazine reaches 7.6 million Millennials, and its readers spend 18.4 billion dollars on fashion – though this data covers an undefined timespan. *Teen Vogue*, an offshoot of the title, targets younger readers. It was launched in 2003 as a print magazine, but

currently only has a digital edition. Although it addresses younger readers, it is 'equally invested in progressive politics as it is in fashion, beauty, and celebrity culture' (Keller, 2020: 817). According to its media kit, *Teen Vogue*'s website reaches an audience of 12 million, and its social media channels are followed by 14 million users (Teen Vogue Media Kit, 2024). The title's readership is 'more likely to be women 18–24,' who spend 9.3 billion dollars on fashion (again, the timespan is not clear). *Refinery29*, part of the Vice Media Group, is a lifestyle platform and publication that mostly targets younger Milennial and Generation Z women. The publication has been referred to in academia as a pop culture site (Duffy, Miltner & Wahlstedt, 2022) or a post-feminist publication (Gill & Orgad, 2019). I was not able to obtain detailed data on *Refinery29*'s readership, as the Vice Media Group did not respond to my requests.

To better assess *Refinery29*'s political discourses, it is important to gain an insight into its backstory, which also points to ambivalence at the heart of the publication's engagement with politics. *Refinery29* was founded in 2005 by Justin Stefano, Philippe von Borries, Piera Gelardi and Christene Barberich as a niche fashion and beauty blog, specifically focused on shopping in New York. Over time, in addition to fashion and beauty content, the platform shifted its focus to women's issues, covering problems like the gender pay gap and sexual harassment. Self-identifying as an empowering platform for progressive Millennial women, editorially, *Refinery29* has foregrounded issues of race (with its 'Unbothered' section focused on Black women) and championed women's professional and financial success (discussed in the sections 'Career Advice,' 'Money Diaries' and 'Personal Finance'). In the 2010s, *Refinery29* grew into a popular feminist authority on beauty and fashion, which mixed social commentary with fashion advice. Having achieved commercial success, *Refinery29* launched its versions for the UK, Germany and Australia in 2015, 2016 and 2021 respectively. The US, UK and German branches of the publication were acquired by the media company Vice Group in 2019.

While the editorial profile of *Refinery29* emphasised women's empowerment and commitment to social issues, its progressive image was shattered in 2020 when several former *Refinery29* employees exposed the toxic work culture at the company. The accusations were triggered by the murder of George Floyd in May

2020 and *Refinery29*'s public reaction to the racial justice reckoning it provoked. When the platform changed the colours of its website in an apparent expression of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, former employees began to post testimonies on social media, exposing the toxic work environment at *Refinery29*, its discriminatory hiring, remuneration and editorial practices, which were routinely prejudiced against women – and in particular women of colour. In a response to the wave of social media accusations, the platform's co-founder Christene Barberich and chief content officer Amy Emmerich stepped down from their positions. In her farewell statement, Barberich wrote:

> I co-founded Refinery29 to do something different: I wanted to amplify and build community around women rarely seen or heard in media, including media directed at women themselves. I know now that we fell short in cultivating that same mission and building that same safe space within Refinery29, to the detriment of Black women and women of color in particular (cited in Robertson, 2020).

A subsequent investigation by CNN revealed that women employees at *Refinery29* were regularly underpaid and overworked, and writers were pressured to write up to seven articles a day, as the platform strove to drive traffic and engagement (Flynn, 2020). The CNN investigation revealed that the 'Unbothered' section, which claimed to highlight and honour experiences of Black women, had been launched despite resistance from *Refinery29*'s management and had been run by a 15-year-old intern. Similarly, where women's career growth was concerned, the publication hardly practiced what it preached, as it routinely rejected women employees' requests for raises. In September 2020, the platform hired a new editor-in-chief – Simone Oliver, a Black woman who had previously worked at *The New York Times*, the fashion magazine *Allure* and Facebook (Tracy, 2020). Oliver stepped down from her positionat *Refinery29* in July 2022.

In response to the 2020 scandal, Vice Group, the owner of the platform, has launched yearly reports on diversity and inclusion and pay equity at *Refinery29* (Vice Media, 2022). The data for the year 2022 shows that overall, 58.08 percent of *Refinery29*'s employees are white and at the executive level, 61.11 percent are male and 66.67 percent are white. The publication's updated mission statement, as of late 2023, reads, 'As a creative global platform for ALL young people Refinery29

celebrates and challenges the world we live in now and reflects the one you are shaping for tomorrow. We tell stories in our own words that enlighten, inspire, and drive change from the ground up' (Refinery29, n.p.). The case of *Refinery29* points to the professional precarity and unethical employment practices that can be fostered by a drive for digital performance. It also reveals how political conversations can be utilised for clickbait when considerations of content performance take precedence. The case of *Refinery29* exposes further ambivalence at the heart of political discourses in lifestyle media, as it showcases the conflict between a potential desire for the political (Berlant, 2011), the overwhelming demands of digital performance, and the discrepancy between employees and executives (Duffy, 2013). In the case of *Refinery29* (and potentially, many other publications), political gestures may emerge from the state of precarity, are furnished by the algorithmic metrics of digital performance and are both performative and genuine at the same time.

4.3 Perspectives on politics from *Vogue*, *Teen Vogue* and *Refinery29*

The beginning of 2021 marks the start of Joe Biden's presidency, and the period between January 2021 and October 2022 analysed for this study coincides with a widening ideological gap between Republicans and Democrats. The growing differences between the two parties are exemplified by the 6 January insurrection, when far-right groups stormed the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., in an attempt to overthrow the government and reinstate Trump as the president. As several years have passed since the attack, high-profile representatives of the Republican Party are still refusing to recognise the severity of it (Mascaro, 2024). The conservative assault on transgender rights and abortion rights, along with the anti-immigration and 'anti-woke' rhetoric, which was further consolidated as the GOP socio-political programme in the early 2020s, also testify to a growing chasm between Republican and Democratic Party policies. Issues such as gender-affirmative healthcare, border control, sustainability, critical race studies and access to abortion continue to polarise along the partisan lines. 'Anti-woke' rhetoric became the basis of Republican Governor of Florida Ron DeSantis' political course, as he lashed out against gender-affirmative care for transgender children, critical race theory and discourses of corporate responsibility (Mudde,

2023). In June 2022, the Republican-majority Supreme Court overturned the 1973 decision in the case of Roe v. Wade, which guaranteed equal access to abortion on the federal level – from then on, the responsibility for abortion regulations has been relegated to the US states. American fashion and lifestyle publications, too, address the relevant political issues and events of 2021–2022. In the following section, I will analyse the publications' discourse on Biden's presidency – I have decided to concentrate on this subject for a number of reasons. Firstly, it invites a discussion on the degree of polarisation within US society. Secondly, it is a discourse that continues to play an important part in US politics, as the 2024 presidential election looms (The New York Times, 2024). Thirdly, it shines a light on a whole range of questions about democracy, faith in the US government and its legal system, and misinformation. The publications' discourses at the start of Biden's presidency, marked by a pronounced departure from Trump's policies and by the 6 January attack on the Capitol, therefore, offer an excellent starting point for looking into their attitudes towards democracy, the US government and the US political system.

4.4 Attack on 'our democracy' – discussing the insurrection and polarisation

All three publications express concern about the rise of polarisation in the US and address the consequences of the growing ideological divide between the country's two major parties. Although all three publications sympathise with the Democratic Party, their coverage of politics differs. Similarly, their discourses around Joe Biden's presidency and administration also vary.

Famously, *Vogue US* has endorsed Democratic presidential candidates over the years, supporting Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020. The magazine's attitude towards these politicians is most clearly expressed in Anna Wintour's editorial letters, which open every print issue. The letter from the August 2021 issue, for instance, reads:

> How incredible to think that President Biden's Inauguration was only six months ago – it feels like a different century. The American vaccine effort has proceeded with such speed that we're headed into a summer of relative normality (I wish

> this were so around the world). Economic stimulus is also coming, as well as aid to families and investment in infrastructure. It's fashionable to say President Biden is boring. But I would call the pace of change under his administration electrifying (Wintour, 2021b, p.14).

The letter is enthusiastic, starting with an emphatic statement of 'how incredible' it is that 'only six months' of Biden's presidency have turned the US into 'a different country.' Wintour associates Biden with 'normality,' while confirming the US' pre-eminence in terms of its vaccine effort ('I wish this were so around the world'). She is also quick to head off any possible criticism of Biden, interestingly, using the word 'fashionable,' writing that 'it's fashionable to say President Biden is boring.' In the following sentence, Wintour, considered a global fashion authority, retorts that she finds his politics 'electrifying.'

In her editor's letter from the February 2021 issue, with a portrait of Kamala Harris on the cover, Wintour writes:

> There is light ahead, and hope, but it's been a dark time and a complicated time when it comes to feelings of national pride. Thank goodness we have an empathetic and deeply prepared new president-elect in Joe Biden and a historic new vice president-elect in Kamala Harris who I am so proud to celebrate on our cover this month with two portraits by Tyler Mitchell. [...] The vice president-elect pledges to bring a new sense of unity to this country, and I for one will be cheering her and President Biden on (Wintour, 2021a, p.28).

Published in the wake of the 6 January insurrection, the letter evokes 'a dark time and a complicated time when it comes to feelings of national pride,' which it contrasts with the 'light ahead' that Biden's presidency and Harris' vice-presidency promise. Wintour's letter is once again appreciative of the administration, which, she hopes will succeed in bringing more unity to the country.

The profile of Kamala Harris echoes the contrast between the time before and after Biden's election and the hope that the new administration will bring order and normalcy:

> Just a few months ago, the United States of America was in free fall. No one knew which way the election was headed, record numbers of people were losing their jobs, homelessness was worsening, COVID cases were spiking, and winter

> lockdownsloomed. Then, at the end of their steady, dutiful campaign, California SenatorKamala Harris and former Vice President Joe Biden swept a series of likely andunlikely states. [...] Despite those victories, Harris, Biden, and the rest of us had towait for nearly a week for news outlets to declare them the winners (Okeowo, 2021,p. 52).

Here, the orderliness of the 'steady and dutiful' Biden-Harris campaign is at odds with the chaos of the 'free fall' experienced before their victory. It is also contrasted with the chaos and violence of the 6 January insurrection:

> All the while, President Donald J. Trump refused to concede, telling his followers that he had won the election, spreading conspiracy theories about fraud, and demanding recounts in as many states as he could. In January, a mob of Trump's supporters followed his lead: They rioted at the Capitol, violently raging through the halls and offices of Congress as lawmakers hid; they looted and fought police officers, leaving five people dead (Okeowo, 2021, p. 52).

In *Vogue*'s profile of Kamala Harris, the new administration is associated not only with normalcy but also with unity, as opposed to the divisive rhetoric of Trump:

> [T]he idea that all Americans share the same concerns that keep them up at night [...] We're also united by the fundamental challenge of keeping our families healthy and safe, she argues. It's a belief that has guided Harris and Biden through the winter, as Trump and his surrogates have mocked his opponents and denied their win, dreaming up fantasies of election rigging (Okeowo, 2021, p. 55).

Interestingly, the magazine consistently uses the pronouns 'we,' 'us' and 'our' in reference to the people of the US, while marking Trump supporters as 'they,' symbolically demarcating them as an aberration, which is intensified by the use of the word 'surrogates.'

The discourse of hope associated with Biden's politics continues in the magazine's September 2022 issue in the profile of Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, then newly appointed to the Supreme Court:

> Justice Jackson's confirmation speaks to a deep-seated American desire to believe that we can transcend our past. We yearn for a country that lives up to the idealized version we hold in our minds. We want to believe that someone whose

> parents attended segregated schools in South Florida could ascend, joyously, to the very highest ranks of our government. That she could take her place on a Court that 165 years ago declared her ineligible for citizenship due to the color of her skin, or, 114 years ago, declared her inherently inferior due to her gender (Umana, 2022, p. 307).

In the text, 'we' seems to encompass the whole of America, embedding the American dream in a shared dream of social advancement – for Black people, for women. Repeatedly using 'we' suggests unity, an ability to strive for a better world that Biden's appointment of Brown Jackson will help achieve.

Refinery29, too, draws a contrast between the Trump and Biden administrations:

> [T]his administration has already set a wholly different tone from the last one — a humble, reverent one that appropriately addresses our solemn historic moment rather than a bombastic, self-serving one. There was no gloating, and certainly nothing like Trump's ostentatious display at the Republican National Convention (Gontcharova, 2021).

Similar to *Vogue*, *Refinery29* depicts Biden's presidency as 'different.' The two administrations are described through the use of antonyms – the 'humble' and 'reverent' new one and the 'bombastic' and 'ostentatious' old one, whose 'gloating' is unbecoming for 'our solemn historic moment.'

In another article, the publication calls on the new administration:

> Biden has succeeded at overturning some of Trump's most dangerous policies, but especially in the age of COVID, we need to do more than just undo Trump"s damage. When it comes to immigration, we don't just need something better than Obama's guidelines and kinder than Trump's xenophobia: As Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez says, we need to reimagine our current carceral, unethical system altogether. And Biden has the chance to create — and should aim for — a legacy that's better than "better than Trump." Because in 2021, America needs more than just an incremental improvement — we need real change (Wang, 2021a).

Different to *Vogue*'s emphatic praise and expressions of contentedness with the new administration, *Refinery29*'s text has critical undertones, calls for more decisive political action, and voices political demands. The repetition of the word 'need' – 'America needs [...] we need real change' communicates urgency and

dissatisfaction with the extent of political improvement. Elsewhere, the publication features an article that makes fun of the new administration's PR department, which keeps posting videos of the president and vice-president as they walk through the White House (Wang, 2021b).

Commenting on the 6 January attack on the Capitol, *Refinery29* writes:

> January 6, 2021 will go down in history for many reasons: It was the day a large group of Trump loyalists stormed the Capitol building. It was the day lawmakers had to evacuate the House floor. It was the day the transfer of power from one administration to the next was violently challenged. For Black onlookers, it was yet another day in which we were reminded why we chant "Black Lives Matter." It was a day which offered an undeniable display of how whiteness works in this country and how its privilege protects white bodies — not Black ones (Onyekweli, 2021).

Here, again the pronoun 'we' is used – although here it evokes more than unity, also bringing to mind a shared experience of systemic racism. Here, 'we' refers to Black Americans, whose interactions with the police, as the writer says, are fraught with risks, unlike the white rioters, whose unlawful actions were treated leniently. Using the occasion of the insurrection to address the racial divide within the USA, the article examines some of the reasons why Americans are divided. The tone of the piece is accusatory, and the text is full of repetition (three sentences open with 'It was the day [...]'), which emphasises the momentous nature of the event, but also communicate anger and growing disappointment.

In *Teen Vogue*, which has significantly more political content than the other two publications, politics are discussed in news snippets and longer op-eds, which have become the signature genre of the publication. Op-eds are typically long-read argumentative articles on pressing political issues. Following the storming of the Capitol, *Teen Vogue* published an opinion piece, in which author Lucy Diavolo calls Trump a fascist:

> President Donald Trump is the leader of a national fascist movement, and yesterday, his movement attempted to violently reject democracy in his name and in the name of this country, which they believe belongs to them. A years-long alliance with more traditional Republicans fostered its power, and on Wednesday, that movement again showed its force — a naked, terrifying display of fascist insurrection in the halls of Congress not unlike what we saw in

Charlottesville, Portland, or Kenosha.

> Many of those at the Capitol apparently came from a rally the president hosted near the White House earlier in the day. It is difficult to imagine a more textbook definition of fascism than a deceitful, delusional authoritarian agitating his forces outside his palace, goading them into attacking the execution of a democratic process (Diavolo, 2021).

The author's anger is expressed in the sequences of derisive adjectives to describe the actions of the insurrectionists and Trump – 'a naked, terrifying display of fascist insurrection'; 'a deceitful, delusional authoritarian.' The very use of the word 'fascist' is attention-grabbing, instantly commanding a visceral reaction. The text, like the others analysed above, seeks to make sense of who the US belongs to, and the first sentence of the excerpt above is crowded with pronouns: 'his movement attempted to violently reject democracy in his name and in the name of this country, which they believe belongs to them.' The text concludes:

> Fascism came home yesterday, to the halls of U.S. legal power, to the heart of a settler-colonial empire. In an ITV News video clip, we can see this is exactly how the fascists saw it. Following the fascists into the building, the ITV cameraman captures someone declaring, "We're home!" Later in the clip, the fascists chant inside Congress, "Whose house? Our house!" They truly believe this country belongs to them, and, in too many ways, they are not wrong (Diavolo, 2021).

Here, the US is referred to as a 'settler-colonial empire' and the 'fascists' described as chanting, 'We're home.' They are depicted as people who 'truly believe this country belongs to them' and 'in too many ways, they are not wrong.' In the text, the 'settler-colonial empire' also encompasses 'them' and a reluctant 'us,' making for a forcedcohabitation within a divided nation.

Writing for 'young' people, *Teen Vogue* often assumes that the distinction between 'we' and 'them' runs along the generational split. Its accounts of the attack on the Capitol centre on teenagers and young people who reported their insurrectionist parents to the police (Latifi, 2022), highlighting the unbridgeable political divide between generations within families. Similarly, it is not uncritical of the Democratic Party, with a 2022 op-ed on Joe Biden's decision to run for a second presidential term expressing anger at the Democratic establishment and the issue of the ageing party, for instance:

> Biden likely will point to this sad state of affairs [within the US politics] as evidence of why we need him. Why we *must* play the game and support his reelection. But the argument that he, and he alone, can solve our problems also enables the continuation of such a world. It rationalizes the systems, institutions, and logic that keep white supremacy and patriarchy in place. It limits our political imagination and keeps us electorally dependent on a group that continues to maintain rights for themselves at the cost of us all (Evans, 2022).

The 'we' in the excerpt seems to refer to two different groups – firstly, the discontented 'we' of the younger electorate ('we *must* play the game') and secondly, 'we' as a larger group, possibly, the whole country with its shared problems, who have to bear the cost of the policies promoted by ageing Democrats:

> As white Christian nationalism becomes the defining feature of the political right, Democrats extol the virtues of bipartisanship, patience, and moderation. We live in a country where the people who are charged with responding to our escalating political crises are also the least likely to live with the long-term consequences. So, yes, age matters (Evans, 2022).

Here, the 'we' that *Teen Vogue*'s author associates with is the 'we' that is divorced from and opposed to the Democratic establishment.

What the texts analysed in this section have in common is that they engage – to a greater or lesser extent – with the definitions of what the US is and who the country belongs to. They define the 'us' and 'them' of the US, which appear to mean different things in different articles and publications. Texts from *Vogue* tend to emphasise the sense of unity, seeking to establish 'us' as the whole country, appealing to the common experiences of US Americans, with the profile of Kamala Harris a prime example of this; or the shared dreams of Americans as the essay on the appointment of Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court does. The magazine repeatedly associates the Biden administration with the promotion of unity across the divided country. *Refinery29* and *Teen Vogue* present versions of a more fractured 'we,' focusing on ongoing and problematic divisions within American society. In its articles, *Refinery29* seems to oscillate between different visions of what 'we' means, also presenting contradictory views on the Biden administration. *Teen Vogue* has more political coverage and politics-related content than the other two publications, with daily political op-eds and a regularly

updated news section. With its strong focus on politics and young people, *Teen Vogue* assumes the position of a young reader critical of Republican conservatives, but also of the Democratic establishment. Its texts betray uncertainty as to what 'we' and 'us' may mean in the US today. Whereas *Vogue US* reiterates feelings of hopefulness and optimism with regard to the Democratic establishment, *Teen Vogue* expresses anger and dissatisfaction with it, while *Refinery29* seems to have fluctuating attitudes towards the Democratic Party in general and Joe Biden in particular. All three publications, however, support the political agenda of the Democrats – defence of trans rights, protection of abortion rights, reduction of climate risks and support for sustainability. Related takes on sustainability, equality and feminism occur in the magazines' articles on brands and celebrities.

4.5 Whose responsibility? Corporate and lifestyle politics in fashion and lifestyle publications

In this part of my study, I would like to shift the focus from politics to the neoliberal appropriation of politics and the political in fashion and lifestyle magazines. Although this part of the chapter concentrates specifically on the neoliberal discourses on politics in US American publications, the issues it tackles are relevant across the different publications discussed in this work. Political talk and politicised statements have long been besieged and appropriated by neoliberal governmentality, as shown by the examples of popular feminism (with its individualistic, consumption-driven reading of feminist empowerment) in fashion publications discussed earlier. In this part of my analysis, I endeavour to look at the themes of corporate responsibility and representations of brands as vessels of political action more closely. I also address the political meanings behind the recurring discussions of work, labour, pleasure and authenticity in lifestyle publications.

Although the issues this chapter tackles can be found across publications in different markets and countries, I believe that US lifestyle media offer rich material for analysis, not least due to the prominent position of US cultural and political discourses and the far-reaching influence of US lifestyle and fashion media. Firstly, I would like to briefly establish the key notions my analysis of

the neoliberal co-optation of political discourses draws on. Then I move on to a discussion of the discourses in the lifestyle publications analysed and inquire into the narratives, which I argue exemplify the ambivalence with which fashion and lifestyle media approach unresolvable situations.

Neoliberalism and political responsibility: An entangled relationship

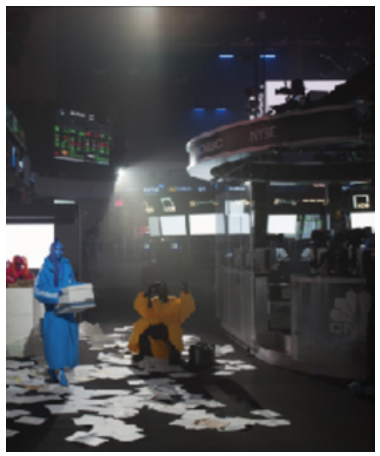
In the Introduction to this work, I define neoliberalism as a sense-making, norm-shaping, cultural and socio-political sensibility, rather than an economic project (Littler, 2013; Brown, 2015). Derived from the notion of a self-regulating market, neoliberal sensibility prioritises productivity, entrepreneurialism and choice as modes of conduct for individuals and corporations alike. As it coincides with and accelerates the curbing of the welfare state, neoliberalism proposes corporate-led and consumption-based practices as alternatives to state-provided services (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Brown, 2015), introducing the ideal of a self-sustaining, productive and entrepreneurial subject, whose success or failure depends on their conduct (Scharff, 2016; Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2017).

Against the backdrop of a declining welfare state, corporate players take over an increasing number of cultural and political functions and the notion of a brand (Arvidsson, 2006) acquires additional gravity. Seeking to distinguish themselves from the competition, brands pursue meaningful affective relationships with their consumers, derived from an increasingly intimate knowledge of those consumers' values and politics (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012). An entanglement of brands and consumers in affective, political and cultural relationships, not only changes the scope of the marketing and advertising industries, but also reconfigures the broader meanings of authenticity, labour and activism. Drawing on this brief outline of key concepts, I further analyse how they are validated within fashion magazines.

4.6 Fashion brands with a cause: Responsibility discourses in fashion media

Responsibility for the community

In the publications analysed, acts of corporate responsibility on the part of fashion brands are often described as a natural extension of their offering. Companies are not only praised for their products, but are portrayed as socio-political actors. In the September 2022 issue of *Vogue US*, the magazine presents the fashion industry as a political battlefield:



> There was a moment, midway through the Balenciaga show at the New York Stock Exchange in May, when the venue"s countless stock-ticker displays began to freak out, screens flashing and pixelating in time with the techno soundtrack as latex-masked models clad in satirically large business suits stomped by, never breaking stride. Aha, I thought: Yes, truly we living in the extended-dance-remix era of late capitalism. Everything"s breaking down—global pandemic, culture war, actual war, climate crisis, inflation, what even is crypto, anyway?—but the song keeps playing on its endless loop, and so we keep dancing to its beat. At its best, this is what fashion does: it shows us 'the now' (Singer, 2022, 267).

Image quote: Vogue US September 2021, 'Fashion's new world,' photographed by Nigel Shafran.

In this passage, a fashion show is said to encapsulate 'the now' with all its socio-cultural challenges. The above quote maintains that fashion is no trivial business, it foretells the future, 'points the way forward, to something new.' This statement is further explored as the article goes on to describe the brands and designers which it positions at the forefront of positive change. The coverage of Balenciaga, is given two centrefolds in the issue, accompanied with photographs staged at the New York Stock Exchange, which offer a visual throwback to the

brand's show and emphasise the brand's disruptive nature. The placement of the images, rendered in dark tones, at the very beginning of the article might signify not only the brand's trailblazing position in the fashion world, but also the prevailing mood of the time – confusion, absurdity and horror ('Everything"s breaking down—global pandemic, culture war, actual war, climate crisis, inflation, what even is crypto, anyway?—but the song keeps playing on its endless loop, and so we keep dancing to its beat,' states the article). One of the images showcases masked models standing among papers strewn across the floor, alluding to the disorder and chaos of current times.

While the article starts with a pessimistic reference to the problems plaguing the world, it evolves into a panegyric to brands that make the world a better place. They do more than just try to produce sustainably – they place 'environmental considerations front and center.' The statement seems to be supported by the image that accompanies it, featuring three models wearing clothes by the brands Gabriela Hearst, Péro and Marinne Serre, photographed in what seems to be a plant shop – vegetation, in fashion magazines, whether in the form of potted plants or vast fields, appears to be a reliable metaphor for sustainability.

Image quote: Vogue US September 2022, 'Fashion's new world,' photographed by Tina Barney.

The article conveys the feeling that positive change is not only imminent, but is already happening:

> Far from a greenwashed afterthought, responsible clothing production is now finally integral to the industry, with some of the most imaginative and impactful design placing environmental considerations front and center—led by a sweep of women-fronted brands from Paris to New Delhi, including Marine Serre, Gabriela Hearst, Péro, Ahluwalia, Bode, and Rave Review (Hawkins, 2022, p. 282).

In the September 2021 issue, other designers convey their position on improving fashion and the world – 'Chromat designer Becca McCharen-Tran talks about "exploding beauty norms",' 'Gypsy Sport's Rio Uribe sees fashion as one front in afight for representation and equal rights' (Singer, 2021, p. 251). The issue also offers a short feature on jewellery designer Ana Khouri – after outlining her range, the text goes on to describe her commitment to social responsibility – 'since 2014, Khouri has also been overseeing Projeto Ovo, a philanthropic endeavor that sells pre-owned (Khouri prefers "pre-loved") designer pieces donated from various individuals and brands, directing the proceeds to 80 different Brazil-based NGOs' (Ramzi, 2021, p. 204).

As per the fashion media, discourses of corporate responsibility, entrepreneurial success and political consciousness do not need to be mutually exclusive. Similarly, a *Refinery29* feature equates political empowerment to business acumen:

> AT&T Dream in Black is a lifestyle platform designed to merge Black culture with technology. Through their Black Future Makers programming, they are tapping in culture shapers, influencers, activists, entrepreneurs, and entertainers who are making a difference in their communities. Recently, the brand celebrated Black excellence at this year's Essence Festival of Culture in New Orleans with a series of interactive panels. The events featured so many of our faves like Lori Harvey, Coco Jones, Lala Milan, and Ashanti to discuss important cultural topics such as generational wealth, budgeting, and leveraging our collective and individual power to impact the future for good (Pierre, 2022).

A lifestyle platform is described as an activist endeavour, helping to make a difference across Black communities. However, the text does not elaborate on what kind of change needs to be made and how exactly this should happen.

Instead, it places an emphasis on the celebratory aspects of the enterprise (such as the presence of 'our faves' at the events) and presents an optimistic promise of positive change – 'celebrating,' 'leveraging power' 'for good.'

Notably, the word 'community' is frequently used in relation to brands' social responsibility. 'Community is the watchword among this American generation,' writes editor-in-chief Anna Wintour in her introductory letter for the September 2021 issue of *Vogue US*, pointing to the fact that political and social accountability has come to be expected from fashion companies:

> Community is the watchword among this new American generation—among designers such as Brandon Maxwell and Kerby Jean-Raymond and Christopher John Rogers, all of whom you can see in our back-to-work themed shoot by Ethan James Green. I love Ethan"s pictures, which were taken in the Vogue offices on two busy spring days as New York was opening up after so many months of pandemic restrictions, and which feature a bevy of real Vogue staffers and a cast of American models who define the moment. Community, of course, matters to models too, and the current generation seen in these pictures is at the forefront of a thrilling change in our thinking about beauty, bodies, and what it means to have influence and visibility in the fashion world (Wintour, 2021c, p. 118)

In the confident and brisk manner characteristic of editors' letters, Wintour makes a sweeping statement, in which 'community,' a new generation of designers, 'thrilling change,' 'influence and visibility' are somehow associated with each other.

The frequent use of the word 'community' symbolically distances the brands from consumerist contexts and situates them within the context of political activism – brands are shown to be part of 'community' and act in its interests. It is suggested that there is a direct connection between what brands do and the benefits to certain groups of people. In a *Teen Vogue* feature on new, sustainably made UGG boots ('carbon neutral — including offsets UGG purchased — and, for every pair sold, the brand will donate $6 to its partner, the Savory Institute, which works to provide farmers with the resources and data to adapt to regenerative farming methods like rotational grazing'), model Quannah Chasinghorse, a Native American model who *Teen Vogue* calls a sustainability activist, describes them as follows:

> "The thing about these boots for me, it has to do with community," Quannah says. "Regenerative solidarity, the land, all of that, it's community work. And it takes a community to build and create [a] space like this. It's important to see and understand where these products come from and how they're made (Dodson, 2022).

Community and the product are bound together – the community apparently benefits from the sales, which means that the more pairs of shoes UGG sells the better. Chasinghorse's words provide the emotional grain of the piece, as she mentions 'community,' 'solidarity' and 'land.' The feature uses the pictures from the UGG campaign with Chasinghorse, in which the boots are placed against the backdrop of emerald-green grass, reinforcing their alleged connection with nature.

In the US context, the word 'community' is redolent of the civil rights movement (Banet-Weiser, 2012) and evokes associations with the histories of political activism. More broadly, it also relays a plethora of sentiments about communal living, utopian unity and neighbourly support (Bell & Newby, 1971; Brint, 2001). Repurposed for the era of late-stage capitalism, 'community' signifies a group of consumers whom marketers regard as a target group for certain goods and services (Arvidsson, 2006). Seen as an effective marketing category (Banet-Weiser, 2012), in advertising, communities, in the words of Brooke Erin Duffy, 'are made to work' (Duffy, 2016: p. 94). The discourse around community in fashion magazines seems to consolidate varied and contradictory aspects of what 'community' might mean today – from a political union, to an accidental grouping of consumers, to branding shtick. In their references to communities, fashion media and fashion brands acknowledge the political importance of 'recognising' community, but also dilute and depoliticise its meaning. Such ambiguities are not only characteristic of the merging of consumption and political action in fashion media, but are also, quite probably, impossible to resolve. In the publications, references to helping a community may indicate a sincere desire for a better and fairer world. Still, the ambivalence of corporate and consumer responsibility discourses arises from their lack of systemic criticism (Littler, 2012) and the uncomfortable blurring of boundaries between a genuine yearning for emancipation and justice, and corporations' hunger for growth and profit, in which political desires become instrumentalised and co-opted.

One of *Refinery29*'s articles (marked as sponsored) reads:

> Self-care is a radical and necessary act, especially for Black people. Audre Lorde once wrote, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare," a quote that holds true over 30 years later in a world where Black folks still face a disproportionate amount of stress and oppression compared to others, yet aren't given much access to tools for prioritizing our mental health. Of the many ways we can incorporate self-care and self-preservation into our daily routines, carving out time for rest may be one of the most crucial — and a powerful way to do this is through meditation. To help, we tapped interior design duo Tavia Forbes and Monet Masters of Forbes Masters — who recently teamed up with Target to share their design expertise at Unbothered's The Glow Up — to walk us through the steps of creating a space primed for quieting the mind (Bryant, 2022).

Audre Lorde, who was active in the civil rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s, wrote about self-care in her essay published in the 1988 book *A Burst Of Light*, which describes her experience of battling the racism and sexism of the US healthcare system when she was diagnosed with cancer for the second time. By self-care Lorde means self-preservation under adverse circumstances as a means of sustained resistance. Yet, by ripping it out of its context, the article makes a striking connection between her quote and Target, who have created 'a space primed for quieting the mind.' Lorde's view on self-care is self-indulgently interpreted as a call for consumption and re-applied to what is coded a middle-class space of consumption, which starkly contrasts with the recognition of 'oppression.' The article eliminates the notion of 'political warfare' that suggests a collective and shared experience, reconfiguring Lorde's self-care as buying the 'perfect rug, candle or lamp for meditation.' Remarkably, the article acknowledges that 'Black folks still face a disproportionate amount of stress and oppression compared to others,' but suggests that Black people should empower themselves individually through consumption. Given the history of systematic racial and gender discrimination at *Refinery29*, we can only read the text's focus on Black women with scepticism.

This is also a claim of another article, which follows three Black editors of *Refinery29* on their weekend at a luxurious hotel:

> How do you define 'luxury?' The first things that might come to mind: the latest designer It bag, a multi-course tasting menu at the neighborhood's buzziest

> restaurant, a vacation at a pricey resort in some far-flung destination. While luxury may often be associated with expensive, extravagant products and experiences, for some, it runs much deeper than materialism — it's how you perceive it. For Black women who weren't always welcome in these spaces, luxury is doing what makes you happy and permitting yourself to enjoy them, whether that's spending your hard- earned dollars on designer fashion or simply treating yourself to some 'you' time (R29 Unbothered, 2022).

Here again, the three *Refinery29* editors' private and aspirational act of indulging in luxury is cast as a political endeavour to the benefit of the entire broad category of Black women. Consumption is justified by the article's statement that, for Black women, luxury 'runs much deeper than materialism.' While both articles acknowledge that structural inequalities exist, they suggest that disenfranchisement can be overcome through consumption. 'Permitting yourself' to enjoy luxury is suggested as a solution to the feelings of anxiety and discomfort induced by structural racism. The postfeminist orientation towards choice (Gill, 2007) – 'doing what makes you happy' is re-articulated as a political protest against disenfranchisement, while the economic privilege 'associated with expensive, extravagant products and experiences' is downplayed. An individual consumer – 'you' – is invited to bring about political change by adjusting their attitude and adopting certain consumption habits, which, allegedly, are as enjoyable as they are politically relevant.

Work, pleasure and activism

A key element of discourses on the consumption of fashion and luxury is pleasure, which, as fashion media suggest, can coexist with political consciousness. A feature on Lamine Kouyaté, founder and creative director of brand Xuly. Bët in the September 2021 issue of *Vogue US* reads, 'Now (…) buyers, editors and customers [are] increasingly on a lookout for *both joyous and conscious clothing*' (Borrelli-Persson, 2021, p. 186, emphasis added). Elsewhere, the magazine presents a selection of forward-looking brands 'in terms of gender identity, craft, community, sustainability, and, last but not least, *making utterly thrilling and audacious clothing*' (Vogue US, 2021, p. 174, emphasis added); 'Fans come for the clothes and stay for the values' (Singer, 2022, np). In a similar vein, *Refinery29* assures us,

'there are tons of designers producing gorgeous, unique garments and keeping the environment in mind, too' (Baker, 2022) (note how this statement combines excess ('tons' of brands) with a possibility of caring for the environment). And *Teen Vogue*, commending fashion brands' sustainability efforts, notes, 'It's good for the environment and your business' (Rivas, 2019). These quotes assuage any potential guilt regarding overconsumption, claiming that business growth and fashion consumption are compatible with social betterment.

Moreover, brands' commitments to social responsibility are presented as an essential part of running a business, with brand activism often being referred to as 'work.' Tellingly, a *Vogue US* feature on designer Gabriela Hearst is titled 'This Woman's Work' – and, apart from describing the designer's fashion range, it pays considerable attention to her environmental and philanthropic commitments (such as a 'collaboration with a Dutch non-profit that has made a parka for the homeless and refugee camps'):

> Hearst is savvy and seems to have found the sweet spot where sustainability and exclusivity meet. 'We had many opportunities for very rapid growth, and we declined those,' she says when I ask how she reconciles sustainability with producing four collections a year for two different houses. 'My business could be triple the size that it is, but we've decided to go slow because it didn't make sense from a sustainable perspective' (Donadio, 2021, p. 54).

The magazine commends the compromise – 'a sweet spot' – between sustainability and the coveted premise of luxury fashion – exclusivity. The tone of the piece is complimentary, which precludes any possibility of actual criticism of Hearst, and her quote only confirms the point that the article is trying to make – that the designer and the fashion industry in general are capable of combining business savvy with good design and conscious production.

Elsewhere, *Refinery29* posts an article listing '11 Brands Working On Making Our Wardrobes More Ethical' (Murray, 2021) – the title of which suggests that brands toil away with the sole purpose of 'making our wardrobes more ethical' rather than to make profit. The use of the word 'work' to describe the fashion industry's social responsibility initiatives tends to obscure the fact that the actual *raison d'être* of fashion brands is making and selling clothes. Paradoxically,

as the political commitments of the brands are rendered as hypervisible work, the labour of producing fashion products is rarely discussed or commented on. Simultaneously, social responsibility initiatives are linked with fashion, joy and pleasure, which makes them glamorous and aspirational.

Consumption of fashion, too, is presented as a complex process that veers between obligation and pleasure and can be both frustrating and enjoyable. Magazines often point to the challenging aspects of shopping for fashion and beauty products, 'As a big gal, I have a keen interest in inclusive fashion and fat access to popular trends,' reads one article on *Refinery29*:

> But full disclosure: My relationship with fashion wasn't always a positive one; it has resembled a roller coaster full of high highs and low lows. Back when I was a kid, I reveled in the pages of teen magazines while happily experimenting with my personal style. In college, I passionately entrenched myself in a fashion minor. But, as I grew older, it became harder and harder to find trendy pieces that fit my larger body and feet (Offor, 2022).

The article criticises the size discrimination in fashion, pointing out how difficult it is to navigate fashion trends as a plus-size customer. And yet, it encourages the reader to follow the writer's example and persist, looking for styles and designs that would eventually work for them. The article assures the reader that there are brands that do it right – and encourages them to shop for those brands. The experience of the writer, too, turns out to be positive, as she finds more size-inclusive brands. The article connotes enjoyment and happiness associated with fashion (the author 'reveled in the pages of teen magazines'; experimented 'happily with [her] personal style'; 'passionately entrenched [herself] in a fashion minor'). The lack of size inclusivity is presented as an obstacle that can be overcome through savvier consumption practices, and not as an intrinsic problem of the Western fashion system, but as a surmountable inconvenience.

Such narratives offer ways of neutralising potentially problematic aspects of fashion. However, they also reveal contradictions between the fashion industry's promise of consumerist pleasure and the labour that one is expected to invest in order to obtain it. As exemplified by the excerpt above, such solutions are based on the consumer's willingness to adapt and modify their behaviour – instead of

giving up on fashion, dissatisfied consumers are invited to continue their search for the type of fashion that works for them. Such advice demands 'aesthetic labour,' or work on one's self-presentation, determined by cultural ideas about gender and sexuality (Gill, Elias & Scharff, 2017). 'Aesthetic labour' not only involves an individual working on their appearance, but also on their feelings. Demands to keep looking for the right fashion style are akin to the calls on learning to 'love your body' analysed by Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad who see it as part of the neoliberal 'affective turn' (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2022). Here as well, women's dissatisfaction with structural factors (in this case, fashion's lack of inclusivity) is channelled into productivity, evoking Eva Ilouz' concept of 'emotional capitalism' (Illouz, 2007).

However, when magazines admit the possibility that people might be dissatisfied with fashion, they open a discursive space for the criticism of the whole industry. As part of such criticism, the publications engage with issues such as a lack of diversity, insufficient size inclusivity, greenwashing and virtue signalling, seemingly acknowledging the industry's misgivings. For example, this *Refinery29* piece points to the trappings of the fashion industry and pokes fun at the virtue signalling in fashion advertising:

> What do fashion brands really stand for? Nice new clothes? Keeping up with the latest trends? Creativity? Or maybe something else – diversity, perhaps, or empower ment? Capitalism? Greenwashing? Lining the pockets of rich old men who spend their time tax-dodging on yachts? No doubt your level of cynicism will dictate your answer (Jackson Gee, 2017).

Thus the article opens in a manner that implies that a nuanced discussion of the industry's 'evils' will follow. The rhetorical questions ironically list the darker aspects of the fashion system and hint at the capitalist trappings underlying the industry's sustainability, diversity and empowerment endeavours. Yet, the piece continues, 'But what if they [brands] could stand for something else? Meet [brand] Birdsong.'

'Like "green beauty" – a vague term that is often diluted (and debated) – circular beauty is a similarly flawed as a concept,' starts another article in Vogue US (Fanning Andrews, 2021, p. 184). The critique is then quickly dismissed, as

the article suggests an alternative in the form of a joint effort by the marketing platform Loop and 'mega beauty emporium Ulta.' Then there is the *Teen Vogue* article that states, 'As climate change remains an outstanding issue, particularly for younger generations, many dedicated activists are choosing careers in sustainable fashion. While fast fashion continues to affect the environment, the movement for slow, ethical fashion grows' (Momenian, 2022). Here, the publication offers a desirable alternative to fast fashion, which is not to stop consuming entirely, but to consume differently and more slowly, a practice it describes as 'activism.' The article continues:

> The push for sustainable fashion has involved a number of people from influencers to politicians, and everyone in between. There are growing platforms dedicated to providing resources for fashion enthusiasts. One of these platforms is The Sustainable Fashion Forum, which works to raise awareness and build community (Momenian, 2022).

A movement for slow fashion is both activism and a career path – ultimately, it emerges as a productive site, where 'raising awareness' and 'building community' are easily combined with personal visibility, consumption and career building. Here, the solution to climate crisis is presented, in an optimistic way, as compatible with the regime of neoliberal productivity.

These examples demonstrate the ambivalence of fashion magazines' critique of the fashion system. While the magazines acknowledge that there are serious issues within the industry, they also suggest brands or designers who, supposedly, do it right, while avoiding specific criticism of other brands or designers. As 'cultural intermediaries' (Rocamora, 2009), fashion publications tend to offer solutions from within the fashion industry, presenting consumption as a tool. Providing advice has always been a genre-specific trait of women's magazines and fashion media (Barthes, 1990; Rocamora, 2009), as magazines seek to manufacture worth and value in fashion. In their criticism of the fashion industry, fashion media employ an expert tone, knowingly suggesting the 'right' brands to shop from. The brands and designers that fashion magazines present as 'right' are shown as untainted by the perils of the fashion industry. Such brands are portrayed as authentic and real, distinct from brands and designers who engage in greenwashing or virtue signalling.

Authenticity and brand culture

Many of the tropes discussed earlier, such as community commitment or the focus on the brands which do it right, relate to the subject of authenticity. In recent decades, the desire for authenticity has come to permeate cultural industries and dictate modes of personal and corporate self-presentation both on and offline (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2013; Duffy, 2016; Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2022). In her book Authentic TM, Sarah Banet-Weiser links the emergence of authenticity as a desirable market category to the increasing relevance of identity. The 'move from product elements to ideological identity' proved crucial for advertising and marketing industries (Banet-Weiser, 2012: p. 30), as marketing campaigns co-opted the politics of feminism and civil rights, notions of equality and representation. By incorporating the idea of identity into marketing, advertising not only aroused consumers' anxieties about politics, but also responded to their need for authentic connection, recognition and belonging.

A feature from the November 2021 issue of *Vogue US* introduces brands that are finalists for the CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund Award (an annual prize awarded to promising young designers), alluding to authenticity at the heart of the brands offering, 'The lessons they've learned are the ones we've all taken to heart: to stay true to your own vision and to reassess the notion that in fashion, as in life, you need to protect and defend your artistry and your point of view on your own terms' (Yaeger, 2021, p.127). Being 'true to one's vision' and creating 'on your own terms' express the brands' authenticity and also explain why they deserve to be recognised, what is so special about them. Authenticity comes across as embattled – 'something you need to protect and defend.' The article concludes by stating:

> If we take anything away from the brutal experience we have just been through – one that continues to reverberate – it is a profound appreciation for newly emergent communities: congregations of people who, like all the Fashion Fund participants, want their love of fashion to reflect their own personal histories, insist on the primacy of sustainability, and vow to serve diverse audiences while making all the right moves for their businesses to survive and thrive (Yaeger, 2021, p. 127).

This ending suggests, much like the examples discussed in the previous section,

that fashion can be authentic (and reflect designers' 'own stories'), sustainable, socially conscious, but can also be seen to be 'making all the right moves' 'to survive and thrive.' The concluding statement is fraught with ambivalence as 'making all the right moves' presumes awareness, calculation and performativity, which, presumably, is different from authenticity as something immediate and visceral. Ambiguously, authenticity emerges then as honest self-expression that can also be premeditated and employed strategically. The magazines' discourses on authenticity reflect the unresolved conflict between the desire for genuineness that permeates our contemporary culture and its use as a resource or commodity (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2022).

The publications suggest that authenticity may be channelled through brands, where brands act as sources of authentic self-expression for individuals, communities or categories of customers. 'Grieco is trying to elevate products and amplify the voices behind them – Black, brown or otherwise,' writes *Vogue US* (Okwodu, 2021, p. 42) about a shopping platform, implying that products can represent people. 'From Gary Bigeni and Bondi Born to Bianca Spender and Romance Was Born, the casting of models was far more considered and thoughtful,' writes *Refinery29* (Bakshi, 2022). 'Not only are designers putting more average-sized bodies front and centre, but they're also empowering a range of shapes, sizes and ages to really see themselves and have fun with fashion.' The notion of 'seeing oneself' is reiterated across fashion magazines, suggesting that a sense of belonging must be channelled through consumption.

The connection between fashion and identity is indisputable and complex. Fashion and material culture convey information about class (Bourdieu, 1989), age (Twiggs, 2013) and ethnicity. Fashion may become a powerful political instrument, and an instrument of one's identity expression. In fashion media, however, authentic expression is promised through an association with a brand. In the rhetoric of this type of media, 'seeing oneself' represented evokes what Alison Hearn calls 'the conflation of selfhood with neoliberal modes of governmentality' (Hearn, 2012, p.23).

'Seeing oneself' represented is evocative of Brooke Erin Duffy's suggestion that, in neoliberal fashion media, material culture is represented as a natural extension

of one's identity – 'the celebration of one's authentic self [in fashion magazines] relies upon the communicative powers of material culture, as if the external self is a perfect projection of one's spirit' (Duffy, 2013b, p. 147). Similarly, brands are shown as authentic representations of their founders. In an interview with *Vogue US* on the occasion of the launch of her 'clean' skincare brand, actress Scarlett Johansson suggests that the brand is an authentic representation of herself. "'I've been the face of several luxury brands throughout my career, and all of those experiences were really wonderful. But—how do I put this?" she pauses, a black baseball cap semi-obscuring a furrowed brow. "I guess I always felt like I was sort of playing a character in those campaigns, and as I evolved, I wanted to create and represent a brand that was true to me"' (Ellenberg, 2022, p. 216). Here, the brand emerges as an extension of its founder's personality, which allows customers a glimpse into her authentic expression.

4.7 'Become the Next Breakout Brand:' Modes of (self)-presentation and portrayal of personalities in fashion magazines

Authenticity and realness

Lifestyle publications have long encouraged readers to associate themselves with brands, and even view themselves as brands. A 2018 *Teen Vogue* article puts it as follows:

> There are a lot of experts out there who will say that to climb the corporate ladder you must build your 'personal brand.' I'm going to let you in on a little secret — personal branding doesn't have to be just for the 9-to-5 types. It's about you. Embracing, not hiding from, the qualities that make you unique so that you stand out and add value—whether that's in an office, at school or, in my case, on social media (Quinn, 2018).

Penned by the digital creator Courtney Quinn, the article relates the story of Quinn's successful blog. Around the same time, *Refinery29* posted prolifically on the importance of self-branding, including tips on building a personal brand (Leiva, 2019).

Such articles promote the idea of self-branding as arduous labour that should never stop, and encourage an elaborate construction of self-presentation. This call for labour on the self evokes Christina Scharff's research on the rise of the 'entrepreneurial self' (Scharff, 2016; Scharff, 2018) and the idea of the self as a project. Managing the self as an enterprise demands careful regulation of emotions and feelings, which is not only key to success but also requires continuous labour. Interestingly, over time, the publications' approach to self-branding seems to have evolved and more recent magazine coverage appears critical of self-branding techniques, arguing against curated social media feeds and over-managed behaviours. In 2022, magazines were, instead, calling on their readers to be 'true to themselves,' to express themselves and be authentic, and break the personal brand spell' (O'Sullivan, 2020).

Refinery29 criticises the pervasiveness of the personal branding cult, which it believes to be degrading and restricting,

> a digital self-representation via which we attempted to convey our best, funniest, most 'authentic' self. The language used by social media platforms – 'followers' not 'friends,' and performance-based participation which depended on how many 'likes' something got – created a digital space where, over 10 years later, performing for one another with the goal of others engaging in our output is the norm. Whether or not this output is truly reflective of 'you' is no longer the point (O'Sullivan, 2020).

The article lambasts the constricting artifice of online self-presentation, even putting 'authentic' in quotation marks to suggest its deceptive naturalness. It does, however, suggest that people need to have an online presence that reflects who they are. The article concludes with a series of recommendations on how to 'break the personal brand spell':

> You could, as many people do, have a Finsta to post your uncurated, unfiltered thoughts separately from your public-facing account. Equally, choosing to publicly post things you secretly love (even if they seem deeply uncool) can be surprisingly freeing. And if you're someone with a relatively big following, setting clear and firm boundaries between you and your followers can be key to not being hounded if you shift opinion. If we can all recognise that someone's social media presence is only ever one version of them, and that you can't really know someone if you just follow them and never interact with them, we'll all be less rigid in our views of one another (O'Sullivan, 2020).

Yet, these recommendations still assert that readers should work towards creating a satisfying online presence – 'post your uncurated, unfiltered thoughts' or 'post things you secretly love.' Moreover, the article suggests a platform that can supposedly better accommodate the reader's 'unfiltered' presence.

Evidently, such talk of self-expression and being true to oneself testify to the evolution of self-branding and authenticity discourses, instead of dispersing them. The idea of effective self-positioning is still present, albeit rearticulated in terms that appear to celebrate individuality and self-expression. Even though critique of self-branding allows the publications to ostensibly reject the pervasive capitalist demand to perform, they still promote authenticity as a technique for effective appearance management and, ultimately, success. Thus, the *Teen Vogue* article about the launch of a brand by the artist Halsey, reads:

> [T]his launch's foundation is built on Halsey's love for genuine authenticity. 'Just be yourself.' It sounds simple, but we know it's not. Figuring out who you are takes guts. af94 [the name of the brand] allows consumers to let go of convention and become who they want to be. Even if you're not sure who that is just yet, Halsey has created a safe space to explore any and every possibility. The eccentric artist's road to fame was not linear but a marathon of different versions of themselves. Claiming to be 'a different person every week,' Halsey has a closet full of personalities (Mitchell, 2022).

Here, authenticity is presented as something difficult to achieve, something that requires effort, labour, time and investment in beauty products. Adopting a cheerful tone, the article is redolent of youthful rebellion (as it encourages the reader to 'let go of convention') or psychology jargon ('a safe space to explore any and every possibility'). The customer is invited to develop an emotional bond with the brand, while the brand is described as a vehicle for developing one's authentic self-expression. What is remarkable is the use of the phrase 'genuine authenticity,' which implies that different gradations of authenticity exist.

Fashion, or rather, abundant consumption of fashion is repeatedly advanced as a way to express oneself truthfully. An article in *Vogue US* discusses changes within the fashion system, brought about by boundary pushing within the industry (namely, growing gender and size inclusivity), asking:

> But can fashion continue to grow and evolve in an age so unbound by rules? To appeal to a new generation of style obsessives living out their truest selves IRL and URL, it must. 'Every day I try on a new outfit,' Prost says,'"look in the mirror, and feel—no matter how wild—like, Oh, yeah, this does look good. This is me' (Yotka, 2022, p. 44).

As though to support the connection between expressing one's 'truest self' and 'trying on a new outfit every day,' the article is illustrated with a kaleidoscopic collage of fashion looks. 'You be you!' proclaims the title of the piece, urging the readers to search for their authentic self through fashion.

Authenticity is repeatedly presented as elusive and difficult to capture – 'find yourself – whatever that means' (Stieg, 2018), 'all this realness online is fake' (Lloyd, 2019), 'some argue that no one, regardless of race, can or should truly bring their whole selves to work' (Leiva, 2018). In these excerpts, acquiring authentic self-expression is presented as a challenge, but despite its elusiveness, authenticity continues to be posited as a real goal, albeit one that is hard to achieve – as *Teen Vogue* puts it, 'figuring out who you are takes guts.' Despite criticising authenticity discourses, the magazines continue to reassure their readers that being authentic is desirable and possible, and instruct them on how to achieve it.

Authenticity has long been seen as an asset in the neoliberal economy of visibility. The appeal of authenticity lies in its originality, freshness and difference, which also renders it attention grabbing, interesting and highly useful for 'making it' in the economy of visibility. 'Realness' has been successfully traded on TV in the form of seemingly unscripted reality shows, and it has been flaunted on social media, proving an effective tool to engage and attract audiences. In a world starved of realness, the authentic and true is aspirational and desirable, which makes it a great device for marketing and capturing attention (Duffy, 2013; Findlay, 2021). Therefore, far from being eliminated, in fashion and lifestyle media and advertising alike, the personal brand is re-articulated and repositioned through the discourse of authenticity, while the labour of managing the self is channelled towards creating authentic self- presentation.

Authenticity is one quality that lifestyle media praise in the personalities they feature. The celebrities they interview regularly talk about their struggles to 'find themselves' and 'be true to themselves.' Oftentimes, interviews and articles

seek to show the realness and sincerity of their subjects by highlighting their suffering, trauma and vulnerability. Thus, a feature on Bella Hadid by *Vogue US* that claims to reveal the truth behind Hadid's stellar career and peek behind the 'façade' of her reputation reads, 'she is suffering, too [...] the façade is sometimes nothing but a steel dam against a rising floodwater of tears' (Haskell, 2022. p. 74). A feature on Kim Kardashian in the magazine's March 2022 edition also seeks to expose Kardashian's more authentic, less obvious qualities: 'throughout our time today, I find myself struck less by Kim's obvious glamour than by her kindness,' or, 'instantly, one of the most famous women in the world turns into any other mom resorting to bribery to regain calm' (Wang, 2022 a, p. 208). Commenting on the many Kim Kardashian lookalikes (a testimony to her enormous pop cultural impact), the article, nevertheless focuses on the uniqueness of the Kim K phenomenon, concluding with the words: 'On that note, the real Kim leaves the restaurant, without fanfare, past the lookalikes in whom she doesn't see herself. She's got her blinders on, and she's running her own race' (Wang 2022a, p. 255). The article emphasises that Kim Kardashian is a one-off, and even though she has imitators, she possesses that elusive something that has made her a cultural icon. The portraits of Kardashian that illustrate the piece show her in a plethora of different looks, implying the versatility of her self-presentation. The articles also includes a series of photographs with her children, where a smiling Kardashian, dressed in a casual denim jumpsuit, poses in a relaxed manner but still manages look extremely stylish in high fashion.

Such portrayal of celebrities as sincere and authentic brings them closer to – and endears them to – the reader by disclosing their struggles, their problems and the imperfections in their lives. But this obsession with authentic and genuine presentation is also congruent with the proliferation of what Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey call 'testimonial cultures' (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001). As Ahmed and Stacey remark, 'the imperative to speak out and tell one's story operates across the traditional boundaries of public and private spaces, and is mobilised by disenfranchised subjects and celebrities alike,' thus, blurring the distinction between victimhood and attention-seeking. Similarly, Lauren Berlant notes the sentimentalisation of public life and popular culture (Berlant, 1997), calling for a critical approach to the phenomenon, which blurs the line between political action and

speaking out; political subject and confessor. In lifestyle media, the 'disenfranchised subjects and celebrities' that Ahmed and Stacey refer to are often collapsed into one, as publications highlight the trauma, vulnerability and suffering of the subjects they portray. Pain, struggle and suffering become a necessary part of the publications' presentation of people. Be it a celebrity's endeavour to achieve a truthful gender self-identification (as in *Vogue US*'s August 2022 interview with Emma Corrin (Specter, 2022)), or a struggle against restrictive bodily standards in the fashion industry (as in *Teen Vogue*'s interview with plus-size model sisters Yumi Nu and Nathale Nootenboom) (Kim, 2022), or overcoming adverse personal circumstances a message that is at the core of *Vogue*'s feature on Amanda Gorman (Vogue, March 2021 (St. Felix, 2021)) or the feature on Dua Lipa (Wang, 2022b) (the former highlights Gorman's childhood experience as a daughter of a single Black mother, and the latter brings to the fore what Lipa went through as the daughter of refugees).

Challenging situations and their happy resolutions

While the publications address trauma and difficulty, they insist on depicting happy outcomes to challenging situations. Such happy endings are usually facilitated by the subject's labour – their hard work on the self and their efforts to overcome adverse circumstances. Thus, the success of Amanda Gorman is presented as a result of her dedicated labour on the self as well as her hard work to become a poet and presenter. Similarly, in a profile by *Teen Vogue*, performer Becky G is described as having overcome hardship and achieved financial stability through hard work, resilience and dedication (Sherman, 2022). It is worth taking a closer look at such tales of succeeding against the odds, which trace a subject's story from hardship and suffering to success in the form of neoliberal 'happy narratives.' I believe that such narratives constitute the main mode of portraying and presenting personalities in lifestyle and fashion media for women. Structurally, they present an overview of the subject's journey from suffering to a happy resolution, and they maintain that the happy outcome is a direct result of hard labour and work on the self. Their focus on an individualised struggle and individualised solution make them consistent with the neoliberal tropes of self-empowerment and departure

from collectivised political action (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2022).

I use the term 'narrative' here in the sense elaborated by Marianna Souto-Manning – as a story with a plot that helps contextualise, explain and situate human experiences, make sense of the world and one's identity. Narratives thematically organise everyday experiences and life stories, and offer 'a critical means to understanding not only the nature of narrative more broadly, but also the relationship of everyday talk to the social construction of cultural norms and institutional discourses' (Souto-Manning, 2014: p. 162). Elsewhere, in their work on moral narratives, Judy Kim and Molly Crockett remark that narratives typically describe concrete events, actions, and mental states and provide subjective versions of stories, reflecting narrators' goals (Kim & Crockett, 2022).

What is notable about the happy narratives in lifestyle and fashion media is that they still acknowledge structural issues – celebrities and personalities, for instance, tend to be described in identitarian terms, evocative of intersectionality, and the publications' confessional features are written from the position of the subject's social identity, such as this one posted by *Refinery29*: 'it's 2022 and at 28 years old, I'm dealing with an uncovered fear of not looking how I *should* look. For too many decades, Black women have suffered the boundaries of beauty created based on European standards, trying to fit the mold of what a non-threatening, respectable woman of color should look like' (Davis, 2022). By acknowledging the structural limitations that subjects' identities imply, the publications recognise the existence of structural discrimination and social barriers.

While the existence and implications of systemic barriers, complex historical circumstances, trauma or mental illness are acknowledged, subjects are still shown as winners – despite structural and historical circumstances, they have achieved success and recognition. This requirement for a happy ending chimes with Zygmunt Bauman's take on postmodern societies – as striving for pleasure, gratification and resolutions (Bauman, 2011). However, the need for a happy ending perpetuates the misleading notion that, however difficult a personal situation, a happy resolution is always possible. In doing so, 'happy narratives' represent an instance of what Laurent Berlant calls 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) referring to

the persistent hope of a positive outcome in a negative situation. In promoting happy narratives, the magazines downplay the gravity of social, cultural and political obstacles that one has to navigate, producing a deceptively reassuring view that these can be overcome with individual talent, dedication and labour.

The most straightforward definition of celebrity and personality profiles in lifestyle media is interview-based articles in a long-read format that present exceptional, talented and successful people, whose lives and achievements are deemed to be noteworthy and newsworthy. Even though they cite their subjects, profiles are ultimately framed by the work of journalists and editors seeking to write in a style consistent with the publication's tone of voice and positionality (Duffy, 2013). Thus, a profile involves elements of interpretation and positionality, introduced by the editorial staff, and cannot be seen as an unfiltered testimony.

I would like to point out at that I approach the profiles with a certain level of ambiguity. I recognise that the stories of successful women have the potential to empower and encourage, or to provide the reader with a joyful and enjoyable pastime, a refuge from day-to-day life (Winship, 1987). Admittedly, the potential of such profiles to engage with politics also depends on the personality of the profiled subject. However, in what ensues, I would like to outline the recurring themes that appear to be part of different narratives and give them a standard, unified structure that, I argue, undermines the power of the publications' engagement with politics.

On a deeper level, celebrity profiles also manifest what, in culture and society, is considered desirable and aspirational, articulating notions of success and happiness. By identifying and reiterating what success and happiness mean, and how they can be achieved, lifestyle and fashion media do the cultural and political work of selecting and prioritising certain views on success and happiness (terms which are often used interchangeably in lifestyle media). By supporting and highlighting discourses on success, they further entrench them. Celebrity and personality profiles mobilise the power of celebrity, which legitimises the themes and discourses the profiles contain, giving them more visibility and charging them with desirability and aspiration, as they turn personal stories into aspirational tales that motivate and inspire audiences (Adamson, 2017; Chouliaraki, 2012).

Cultural narratives about achieving success can be seen as regulating myths – through a 'promise of happiness,' they prescribe correct modes of behaviour and attitudes. As Sara Ahmed writes, 'happiness' presents a combination of ideas about what is considered, culturally and socially, to be positive and good, and the cultural scenarios for achieving 'happiness' also reflect what is considered good and desirable within a culture (Ahmed, 2010). Foucault points to a similarly insidious form of governmentality when he describes 'technologies of the self': culturally prescribed practices 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 et al, 2008). In the Foucaultian sense, the technologies of the self encapsulate the meaning of self as both a project and a means to an end.

In the profiles, success, visibility and achievement are imbued with glamour and aspiration, producing a value system in which visibility is positive not just on a personal level, but also politically, as it is allegedly harnessed for societal change (Banet-Weiser 2012). I use the term 'happy' here following Sara Ahmed (2010), acknowledging that 'happiness' is a rather abstract and elusive term and is generally pointed to or promised, rather than being clearly defined. In her interpretation of happiness, Ahmed focuses on what happiness does, rather than what it is, indicating the disciplining, regulatory aspects of 'happy' scenarios. The promise of happiness motivates subjects to follow the paths sanctioned by power, which further reinforces existing dominant systems of governance. In lifestyle magazines, success is defined broadly – it lies in career achievements, but also visibility and influence and, in alignment with neoliberalism's 'psychological turn' (Gill & Orgad 2018), clever management of the self, of one's emotions and the ability to find the right balance in life.

'Rewriting the meaning of success:' From pain to happiness

The magazines' 'happy narratives' prioritise depictions of successful overcoming of pain. While acknowledging the existence of an obstacle, difficulty or trauma that has caused the subject pain and suffering, they avoid dwelling on

it, excluding the possibility of critically engaging with the source of pain and suffering. Whereas success, harmony and happiness are usually situated in the present, the moments of difficulty tend to be relegated to the past, which diminishes their political urgency. Difficulty, suffering and pain are depicted as already alleviated by privatised and individual engagement, hard work, self-management techniques and clever use of consumption practices – and are therefore less relevant and less dramatic.

In the course of my analysis, I have identified three major discourses around overcoming a challenge and achieving success that I would like to explore in more detail. Firstly, there is a discourse around overpowering adverse social and economic circumstances and thriving against all odds. Secondly, there is a narrative of surmounting cultural stereotypes and offering a viable alternative to existing beauty standards. Thirdly, there is a narrative of mastering one's mental health issues and achieving a balanced and happy life.

The first discourse, centred on overcoming socio-economic hurdles, offers resilience and hard work as valid strategies for resolving systemic issues. In *Vogue*'s profile of Amanda Gorman, Gorman's success story is retold from her childhood, when the 'family struggled sometimes financially,' to her time at Harvard, which she spent 'balancing classes in English, sociology, and the writing workshop she founded' and, ultimately, to her present success, epitomised by soaring follower numbers on Instagram, a contract with modelling agency IMG and numerous collaborations with companies and brands (St. Felix, 2022). Even more strikingly, in its profile on Becky G, *Teen Vogue* follows the performer's story from her family's financial struggles to her current success ('Becky G is everywhere'), noting that she had to drop out of school to 'support her family financially' and started working when she was just nine years of age. The performer's story is read as a testimony to her assiduousness and industriousness. It is Becky G's current success as a highly visible, financially secure and successful performer, who is also the founder of a brand ('I'm birthing products,' *Teen Vogue* quotes her as saying) that is the focal point of the feature (Sherman, 2022). In both these instances, structural inequality and systemic failures are transformed into appraisals of hard work, underpinned by financial success and entrepreneurialism. While the exceptionality of the subjects is at the fore, this is achieved through labour. The subjects tend to

be presented as busy and involved in a multitude of parallel projects, which aims to make them interesting to readers, but also explains their success. The profiles are replete with mentions of buzzing phones, gruelling regimens and calendars 'scheduled down to the minute, including when it's time for a shower,' as the profile of singer Dua Lipa reads (Wang, 2022b, p. 81).

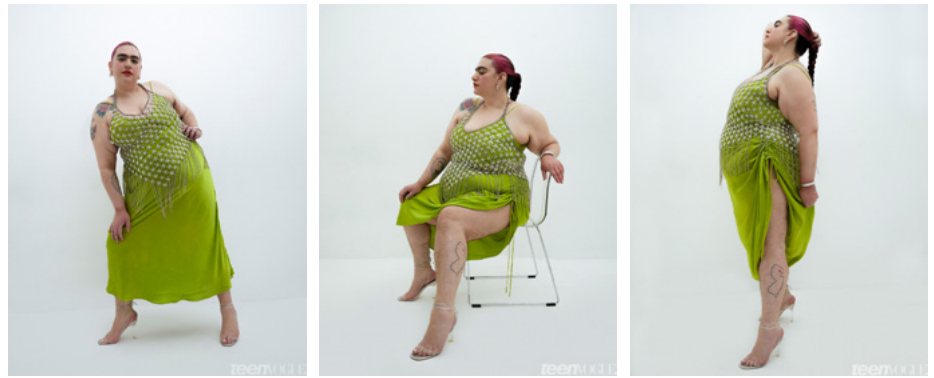


Image quote: TeenVogue.com, 2022, September 13, 'Influencer Avocado Allie won't hide her PCOS-caused body hair,' photographed by Vanessa Granda.

The second discourse on overcoming difficult circumstances revolves around defying stereotypes about the body and restrictive beauty and fashion ideals through visibility and labour. These discourses mobilise the themes of not meeting fashion's restrictive beauty standards, learning to love your body and providing representation for 'non-standard' bodies. In one *Teen Vogue* profile, influencer Allie Bloom is credited with helping to 'destigmatize and educate people about both OCD and PCOS' (La Jeunesse, 2022). The profile follows Bloom's journey towards self-acceptance, outlining her struggles with self-image, and demonstrates how, after learning to love her body, she began working to help others follow her example. Bloom's self-acceptance is described in terms that emphasise the entrepreneurial character of her activism, 'with the goal of increasing awareness of PCOS, Bloom hides nothing from her 125,000 followers,' 'she's formed her own niche community of fellow PCOS sufferers.' Echoing Brooke Erin Duffy's writings on the labour of authenticity (Duffy 2013), here authenticity emerges as a

technique for maximising Bloom's impact – it is both a strategy for success and an asset. '[O]n any given day Bloom can be found sharing intimate photos of herself with captions that destigmatize belly hair on Instagram or posting videos on TikTok about how she learned to love herself.'

The images for the feature emphasise Allie Bloom's confidence and self-assuredness, capturing her looking into the camera, or assuming assertive poses. Her styling plays with the tropes of conventional femininity, such as high heels, skirts, dresses, striking jewellery and long hair, evoking an empowered postfeminist subject who chooses to be sexy and feminine. It is important to note that the profile editorials in *Teen Vogue* follow a certain style – they are colourful, with protagonists wearing brightly coloured makeup and clothes, and they are mostly shot in the studio, giving the general impression that the subjects are 'playing dress up.' The editorials tend to be amplified with glitter, technicolour or neon details, emphasising the youthful aesthetic associated with the Gen Z.

The discourse of people overcoming their struggle with self-image and accepting themselves is ambivalent. While seeking to celebrate diversity, difference and equality, it prioritises individual effort, visibility and labour as methods for defying societal stereotypes and changing cultural attitudes. It also proposes the highly laborious and potentially psychologically damaging approach of heightened visibility for manifesting self-acceptance. Paradoxically, while it claims to disrupt beauty norms and standards, it still dictates a regime of increased self-scrutiny and self-regulation.

In Allie Bloom's profile, the need for labour is presented as never-ending, but also positive – the necessity of work in order to cultivate self-love and, allegedly, to generate widespread change, is unquestioned. The profile claims that embracing yourself 'can take years of patience, practice, and repetition' and goes on to quote Bloom: 'Posting on Instagram really has helped me be more confident in myself.' At the same time, the challenges of visibility (about which Bloom is very vocal on her Instagram) and the toll it might take on someone's mental health are not mentioned. Nor is the fact that for Bloom, social media activism is also a job that involves sharing deeply personal issues moderated in accord with the demands of the visibility economy – although this is implied.

Image quote: Vogue US April 2022,
'Being Bella," photographed by Ethan James Green.

Lastly, the third discourse on overcoming relates to getting one's mental health issues under control and achieving a balanced and harmonious life. Such discourses demonstrate how, through self-management techniques and psychological readjustment, subjects can overcome mental illness and achieve a balanced and harmonious existence in a manner evocative of Foucault's' technologies of the self' (Foucault 2008). In the profile of model Bella Hadid, published by *Vogue US*, Hadid is portrayed as a sufferer, afflicted by mental struggles. The article establishes that the model's mental struggles appear to be rooted in her troubled childhood, framing her as deserving of sympathy. Written over the course of a few weeks, the profile then mentions that the next time the interviewer sees Hadid 'she is in bright spirits' and goes on to describe an extensive repertoire of self-management practices which the model relies on to stay afloat, 'in addition to medication, supplements, psychotherapy, cryotherapy, hyperbaric oxygen therapy, vitamin IVs, muscle testing, meditation, and The Artist's Way, Bella has a

lively spiritual practice, which includes channeling angels and chakra balancing.' While outlining Hadid's struggles with mental health, including her burnout, the profile lauds her excellent work ethic and commends her on being a hard worker – remarkably, even her quest for more privacy is defined in terms of labour ('she has worked hard to keep [her] relationship private' (Haskell, 2022, p. 79)). The serious tone of the text is matched by the sombre editorial, which shows Hadid unsmiling, posing on a swing in a field, next to a brook. Similar to product photoshoots, where the positioning of a product agains a natural backdrop suggests its purity, quality and authenticity (suggesting it is made of natural ingredients), here the natural setting seems to aim to amplify the genuine and authentic presentation of Hadid.

All three major discourses on a successful overcoming of difficulties make use of the themes of resilience, entrepreneurialism and careful management of visibility, maintaining that success and happiness can be achieved through labour and techniques of navigating the neoliberal culture that involve hard work. Apart from demonstrating techniques for overcoming pain, 'happy narratives' also show the correct way to endure it. Pain has to be dealt with through positivity, resilience and continuous effort. Labour is therefore anchored in narratives of pain and suffering – there is the labour of performing and communicating pain and the labour of overcoming pain. The visibility of surmounting difficulties, too, emerges as a form of labour, as the visibility itself is supposed to generate change. The subjects who have managed to achieve success and happiness against all odds are assigned the additional responsibility of creating change by speaking about and showing their pain to help a larger number of individuals to overcome similar obstacles. Such discourses, however, establish an optimistic belief that personal visibility guarantees representation for the underrepresented and brings about political change (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Hearn, 2017).

The outlined examples indicate limitations to political engagement within the 'happy narratives' of the magazine profiles. One such limitation is the focus on consumption and positivity, which has traditionally been a feature of fashion magazines (Winship, 1987; Duffy, 2013). Despite *Teen Vogue*'s reputation as the more politically oriented publication of the two *Vogues*, the profiles in both magazines still prioritise positive emotions, rather than anger, criticism or dissatisfaction.

Secondly, the publications' opportunities to engage with the political in these profiles is also limited by the fact that the subjects are always portrayed as 'good' – and they are good because they are hard-working and entrepreneurial, they work to be visible, to speak up and to take care of themselves, which, as the profiles establish, results in their well-deserved success and recognition. Thirdly, by displaying successful private approaches to managing pain and suffering, 'happy narratives' mitigate the gravity of the problems that generate these distressing outcomes and hinder the possibility of grasping how devastating and immense the effects of systemic failures are.

Inherently 'cruelly optimistic' (Berlant, 2011), 'happy narratives' preclude a meaningful critical engagement with politics and the political and are are at odds with the fashion publications' recent claims to the status of political agents. To demonstrate the futility of 'happy narratives' when applied to political dead-ends and failures, I would like to analyse the case of a falsely optimistic narrative applied to an incredibly tragic and unresolvable situation – Olena Zelenska's profile in *Vogue US*.

Image quote: Vogue US October 2023, 'A portrait of bravery," photographed by Annie Leibovitz.

Limitations of the 'happy narrative'

On the 26 July 2022, *Vogue US* published the profile 'Portrait of bravery: Ukraine's first lady, Olena Zelenska' on its website. The print version of the story, prepared in collaboration with *Vogue Ukraine*, written by Rachel Donadio and accompanied by photographs by Annie Leibovitz, appeared in the October 2022 issue of *Vogue US*. The profile talks about Olena Zelenska's experiences during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, recounting the hardships that the family of President Zelenskyy, but also the people of Ukraine, have been burdened with. The accompanying photos portray an unsmiling Zelenska, dressed in clothes by Ukrainian designers and standing next to the wreck of the Ukrainian plane 'Mriya' at Hostomel's Antonov Airport. She is photographed with her husband President Zelenskyy on the stairs of the presidential office compound, surrounded by sandbags. The photograph, showing Zelenskaya in flat-heeled shoes, in a pose that has been criticised by some as 'unfeminine,' projects resilience and toughness (Carbonaro, 2022).

Immediately after the digital version of the story was published, it provoked a backlash across the political spectrum, mainly targeting Annie Leibovitz' photographs. The critique ranged from statements from the far right, accusing the first couple, incongruously, of spending US money on a *Vogue* photoshoot, to reactions from the left commenting on the trivialising nature of the photographs. At the same time, a number of commentators spoke in favour of the photoshoot, remarking on the solemn and dignified mood of the pictures and arguing that Ukraine was right to use all possible opportunities to draw public attention to the ongoing war. Notably, in a *New York Times* piece in defence of the photoshoot, editor Vanessa Friedman wrote:

> By putting Ms. Zelenska on its cover, Vogue is furthering her role as the relatable face, and voice, of the struggle; bringing her up close and personal for the watching world. And by appearing in public, and raising issues in public, when her husband cannot, she is keeping her country's needs alive in the international conversation at a time when other crises are vying for attention. She has, essentially, weaponized Vogue (Friedman, 2022).

Here, instead of trying to assess how appropriate the publication of the profile was, I want to interrogate the magazine's approach to framing a serious political issue and, more precisely, the discourses employed in the profile of Olena Zelenska and their viability for addressing the potentially unresolvable and horrific matter of the war. More specifically, I want to describe how the themes of the profile relate to the 'happy narratives' of overcoming difficult circumstances, and address their blatant ineffectiveness in describing a tragic and overwhelming situation that has neither a ready solution nor a foreseeable ending.

Again, I would like to emphasise the ambiguity with which I read this profile. As a Russian-born researcher, it is only with shame and disgust that I can contemplate the wrongdoings of the Russian army in Ukraine. While deeply sympathetic of the pain and suffering caused to the Ukrainians, I acknowledge that, as an outsider, I can only understand this to a limited extent. The aim of my analysis is in no way to criticise the decision of Olena Zelenska or, indeed, any Ukrainian person to seek visibility in order to draw attention to their ongoing plight. Instead, my aim here is to address the inadequacy of a neoliberal promissory discourse in addressing the gravity of the war.

Much like the profiles analysed above, the feature on Olena Zelenska presents Ukraine's first lady as a 'good' subject, who is responsible, reliable and resilient, capable of navigating demanding circumstances and adapting to traumatic and frustrating conditions. In particular, the profile praises Zelenska's skilled navigation of visibility and image-making ('there is no script for first ladies in wartime, and so Olena Zelenska is writing her own,' 'Zelenska has emerged into public view to become a face of her nation – a woman's face, a mother's face, an empathetic human face,' 'whether Zelenska"s visit to Washington yields real results, it was a reminder of the power of image-making'). Paradoxically, publicity and visibility are depicted in the profile as two other (minor) challenges Zelenska faces, along with the ongoing war ('Being first lady is not a role Zelenska ever wanted to play. "I like being backstage – it suited me," she told me,' writes Donadio (Donadio, 2022, pp. 108 – 116)), which re-articulates the conflict of the article in privatised terms, shifting the emphasis from the war to the private issue of navigating publicity.

This re-articulation of the conflict in more private terms prevents full and complex engagement with the pain and tragedy of the war, producing, instead, sentimentalised observations on Zelenska's gestures of distress ('her eyes would fill

with sadness, especially when speaking of dead children, and at times she'd stare out the window and cross her hands across her stomach, a gesture of self-protection') or her skilled navigation of the field of visibility to draw attention to suffering:

> There [in Washington], she also addressed Congress, telling a bipartisan group of lawmakers that she was speaking as a mother and daughter, not just a first lady. She showed pictures of Ukrainian children who had been killed by Russian rockets, including a four-year-old with Down syndrome, before amping it up:
>
> 'I'm asking for something I would never want to ask for: I am asking for weapons – weapons that would not be used to wage a war on somebody else's land but to protect one's home and the right to wake up alive in that home' (Donadio, 2022, p. 110).

While Zelenska's profile does speak about the atrocities of the war, its narration is rather fragmented, and the account of the war is interrupted with a lengthy backstory of Zelenska's marriage. Again, a private story is drawn into the foreground, and Zelenska is cast as a 'good' subject – a successful professional and devoted wife. At times, the blend of personal and political becomes rather incongruous: the first lady's 'rust-coloured button-down shirt' is compared with 'the burned-out Russian tanks that I saw lining roads in Irpin and Bucha, suburbs of Kyiv where Ukraine pushed back the Russians.'

The accompanying editorial consists of five photographs, of which two are centrefolds – featuring Olena Zelenska with her husband Volodymyr Zelenskyy, holding hands, sitting at a table in the presidential compound in Kyiv. One image shows Zelenska at Antonov Airport along with two female Ukrainian soldiers and the destroyed Mriya plane visible in the background. In the pictures, nobody is smiling, the tones are subdued and none of the photos contain the designer credits that are normally obligatory for fashion shoots. The names of the Ukrainian designers whose clothes had been used for the shoot are listed at the end of the editorial.

Yet, more paradoxically, the article finishes with a successful resolution – not of the war, but of the challenge of publicity faced by Olena Zelenska: 'It was all so much to bear. The war machine, the media machine. She was doing a job she never signed up for and doing it well' (Donadio, 2022, p. 116). Thus, the profile of Olena Zelenska contains the typical elements of a promissory 'happy narrative.' It presents a subject, who is responsible and hard working, resilient and adaptable and depicts a challenge – in this case, in addition to the insurmountable difficulty of the war, the personal challenge of navigating publicity that, in the end, is presented as resolved. Throughout the article, an emphasis on the private prevents thoughtful engagement with the tragedy and ultimate unsolvable nature of the war, instead offering sentimentalised descriptions of the effects of the war on the first lady's private experience. The profile seems to employ what Luc Boltanski refers to as the discourse of tenderheartedness – an emphatic and compassionate account of suffering 'which may seem to be an obstacle to the politicisation of suffering' (Boltanski 1999: p. 79). The positioning of Zelenska as a 'good' subject seems to underscore the claim that neither she nor Ukraine, represented by her, do not deserve this war and hardship. This is indeed the case, not because of inherent goodness, but simply because no one deserves such suffering – and the sentimental framing of the article seems to obscure this notion.

The feature also seeks to establish Olena Zelenska's political brand, which is based on heartfelt presentation, effective public speaking and the pain that her public appearances convey. The rise of political branding has been widely commented on, most notably by Laurie Ouellette in her analysis of Sarah Palin's branding of far-right politics (Ouellette, 2012). Ouellette sees political branding as a sign of an 'integration of marketing, technology, and media culture in Western capitalist democracies' (Ouellette, 2012: p. 190) and points to its highly emotive character. Vogue's presentation of Olena Zelenska's political brand is affective and comes across as rooted in resilience, compassion and strength, but also injury and pain. Zelenska is portrayed as a sufferer, a representative of and speaker for a hurt country. Commending her visibility, *Vogue* notes that, over the course of the war, the first lady became a compelling public speaker and campaigner. This comment reflects the magazine's attempt to present a happy narrative, finding a silver lining in the horrific situation of the war and presenting a successful resolution of a personal struggle – from Zelenska's ambiguity regarding publicity to her confident self-presentation. Speaking of the 'contingency of pain,' Sara Ahmed notes that pain is an emotion that is both deeply personal and inevitably social

(Ahmed, 2014). Pain needs to be communicated and alluded to, but pain is also extremely difficult to communicate. It is hard to grasp, almost impossible to describe in the moment it is experienced, and can only be registered retrospectively and from a distance. Yet, this distance is precisely what makes pain more abstract and vague, less urgent. Ultimately, Ahmed concludes, a communication of pain requires trust on the part of the receiving audience. In the case of Olena Zelenska's feature, pain is constantly referred to and yet still remains distant. This distance is increased by the elements of the stagedness of the accompanying editorial, which contrasts with the rawness of pain in the ever-present news coverage of the war. Similarly, the fact that the photographer and writer are mere visitors to wartime Kyiv, contributes to the impression of distance from pain – these outsiders can leave the scene of the war whenever they want.

Besides amplifying the visibility of the pain of the Ukrainian people, the feature appears to signal *Vogue*'s affiliation with the US Democratic Party, which has been vocal and instrumental in supporting Ukraine. By portraying Zelenska as the good subject, who is resilient, visible and proactive, the feature and editorial may be seeking to build the readers' trust in the US Democrats and secure their support for ongoing aid to Ukraine.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on how three US publications – *Vogue*, *Teen Vogue* and *Refinery29* – discuss politics and the political. Spanning the period between January 2021 and October 2022, it has looked into the magazines' discourses on the Biden presidency and the aftermath of the 6 January insurrection. It has also offered a detailed analysis of discourses on corporate responsibility, branded political expression, authenticity and personal success. I examine these discourses within the context of neoliberal governmentality, inquiring into their ambivalent representations of the political.

In their depictions of US politics, all three publications express clear support of the Democratic Party and condemn the Trump presidency. This is particularly evident in their discussions on the normalcy they expect President Biden's

administration to return to US political life. In *Vogue US*, Biden's presidency is associated with unity and hope – the magazine employs an optimistic, upbeat tone as it welcomes the new administration and commends its first measures. The support of Biden's presidency is also obvious in the choice of personalities the magazine features in 2021 and 2022 – Vice President Kamala Harris, First Lady Jill Biden, Justice Ketanji Jackson Brown, among others, all of whom have a strong political association with Biden. While still endorsing the Democratic Party, *Teen Vogue* adopts a more critical stance on the Biden administration and champions more progressive politics. The publication represents the views and opinions of younger voters, which is made clear in its use of the pronoun 'we' (to refer to young Democratic voters). *Refinery29* posts a series of pro-Biden and pro-Democratic Party articles, in which the new president is similarly linked to normality and orderliness, but it features articles that both praise and make fun of Biden – which appear to be posted as clickbait.

Refinery29 found itself under fire in 2020, when in the wake of social justice reckoning, the platform was accused of unethical employment practices, rampant racism and sexism, and performative 'wokeness.' This event points to the ambivalent role that political discourses might play in publications' editorial coverage, where a combination of different reasons motivate their use – drive for digital performance, an attempt to attract readers or breed controversy, or genuine concern for civil rights and politics. The contradictions between these different motivations point to the changing role of fashion publications as they embrace political talk and fight for survival within a shifting media landscape.

One lifestyle publication that has also earned a reputation as a reliable political commentator is *Teen Vogue*. The magazine has a large amount of political coverage and its opinion pieces on politics and society are informed, detailed and fiercely opinionated. However, *Teen Vogue*'s editorial coverage, too, presents ambivalent and contradictory narratives on politics, as well as corporate and personal responsibility.

While these neoliberal discourses were already discussed in the previous chapters, here I have explored them in more detail. In line with the neoliberal appropriation of 'wokeness' (Gill & Kanai, 2020), fashion publications present brands

and companies as political agents and promote conscious consumption as a way to improve society. Overall, they present the view that consumption of consciously created goods may offer a path to a better future – for women, communities or the climate. Brands and companies are portrayed not as producers and sellers of goods but carriers of values that may be sustained and strengthened through the act of shopping. The magazines employ a discourse of authenticity to highlight the brands and companies that 'really care' and here authenticity is portrayed as an asset or a hot commodity. To some extent, fashion magazines themselves act as sellers of authenticity as they provide information on genuinely relevant brands or offer glimpses into the lives of celebrities, promising to show them as they 'really' are.

I have noticed that lifestyle publications have a specific way of depicting celebrities, which I call a 'happy narrative.' Evocative of the 'confessional culture' (Ahmed, 2011), in which pain and suffering are spectacularised, 'happy narratives' are recurrent modes of portraying celebrities as successful 'conquerors,' who overcome adverse circumstances and achieve success, recognition and inner peace through hard work and work on the self. 'Happy narratives' present an optimistic neoliberal view that labour and 'affective labour' (Gill & Kanai, 2017) may offer ways to triumph over systemic hurdles. I view them through the prism of Lauren Berlant's idea of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) as stories that encourage people to pin false hopes on failing systems. 'Happy narratives' entail sentimentalisation of the political and portray success and happiness as results of hard work. Of course, a sentimental tone and optimism have long been distinctive characteristics of women's lifestyle magazines as a genre. However, when they are applied to politics and the political, they also undermine the gravity of political discussion. When used in the feature on Olena Zelenska, Ukraine's first lady, conventions of the 'happy narrative' become jarring and clearly ill-suited to discussing an ongoing war and conditions that can not be ameliorated through consumption or work on the self.

Overall, in this chapter I sought to lay bare the ambivalence at the core of fashion magazines, which is particularly obvious in their approaches to politics and the political. All of the publications that I have analysed here offer political opinions and, occasionally, in-depth political commentary. Their involvement with politics and the political, however, might appear at odds with their genre-specific functions of advertising and promoting fashion products. This contradiction is reflected in the coexistence of long-read analytical features and texts on brands' social responsibility, in which political ideas are employed as marketing categories. That said, even the publications' discourses on corporate responsibility and consumer activism may betray not just a marketable instrumentalisation of politics, but also a genuine political desire for justice, equality and social betterment.