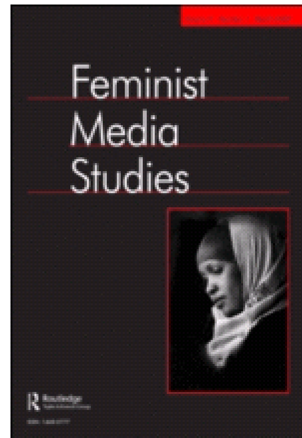

Postfeminist neoliberalization of self-care: A critical discourse analysis of its representation in *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle*

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Abstract: Encouraged by the popularization of the feminisms and the essentiality of care in the face of the increasing precarity of the living conditions, popular women's culture in the global North has been showing signs of a growing interest in self-care practices. Given this new visibility, the present work proposes a critical approach to the discursive representation of self-care from a transdisciplinary and feminist theoretical-interpretative perspective, located at the nexus of political economy and cultural studies. For this purpose, we undertake a critical discourse analysis—from a feminist perspective—of the cultural articulation of self-care in women's magazines *Vogue, Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* (Spanish editions). Among our main findings, we can highlight the hyperfeminization of self-care; the repoliticization of young women's ill-being and wellbeing in postfeminist neoliberal terms; the identification of self-care with consumption practices, especially aesthetic ones, which, in turn, are related to the financialization and indebtedness of everyday life; and the signification of self-care as utilitarian and productive, i.e., as a tool for women to constantly work on ourselves and transform ourselves to optimize ourselves in line with the feminization of the neoliberal subject and the maximization of their human/social/erotic capital.

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Encouraged by the popularization of the feminisms and the essentiality of care in the face of the increasing precarity of the living conditions, popular women's culture in the global North has been showing signs of a growing interest in self-care practices. Given this new visibility, the present work proposes a critical approach to the discursive representation of self-care from a transdisciplinary and feminist theoretical-interpretative perspective, located at the nexus of political economy and cultural studies. For this purpose, we undertake a critical discourse analysis—from a feminist perspective—of the cultural articulation of self-care in *women's* magazines *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* (Spanish editions). Among our main findings, we can highlight the hyperfeminization of self-care; the re-politicization of young women's discomfort and wellbeing in postfeminist neoliberal terms; the identification of self-care with consumption practices, especially aesthetic ones, which, in turn, are related to the financialization and indebtedness of everyday life; and the signification of self-care as utilitarian and productive, i.e., as a tool for women to constantly work on ourselves and transform ourselves to optimize ourselves in line with the feminization of the neoliberal subject and the maximization of their human/social/erotic capital.

Keywords: self-care; neoliberalism; postfeminism; feminist political economy; feminist cultural studies.

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Introduction

The increasing precarity of the living and working conditions inherited from the Great Recession and the ongoing COVID-19 *syndemic* seem to have stimulated a growing interest in care and self-care practices in the political and media arena of the global North. In times in which life's vulnerability is harshly exposed, taking care of oneself and of each other is a radically political (pre)occupation. For instance, Isabel Díaz Ayuso (2021), president of the Community of Madrid (Spain), has advocated "the culture of self-care" against COVID-19 as the most aggressive version of neoliberal anti-welfarism and hyper-individualism. Both this statement and such growing interest in self-care reflect most significantly what feminist economics calls the "capital–life conflict"—a conflict *alleviated* by the care provided freely, precariously and invisibly by women, who are, precisely, the main subjects of its violence (Amaia Pérez-Orozco 2006, 2014). Thus, even though the "care crisis" is not a new or conjunctural phenomenon (Astrid Agenjo Calderón 2021; Pérez-Orozco 2006), nor is the threat against women's lives and wellbeing, the pandemic has triggered a series of "discursive explosions of care", as well as several "carewashing" political, media and corporative strategies (Andreas Chatzidakis et al. 2020).

During the last decades in the feminized mainstream culture—in which taking care of others has traditionally been women's most recurrent place—the conversation about women's self-care had been almost monopolized by what Eva Illouz (2008) calls the "self-help culture", which is intimately linked to the *psychologization* of neoliberalism and postfeminism (Laura Favaro and Rosalind Gill 2020; Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill 2022; Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans and Martine Robson 2019). Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, along with the popularization and mediatization of feminism, popular portraits of women's self-care practices seem to have diversified and boosted their visibility and potential for commercial exploitation, especially in fashion and lifestyle magazines, audiovisual productions, social

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media and the influencer and celebrity culture. In this sense, women's popular culture has taken the lead and is shaping the mainstream vocabulary of self-care.

In this context of hypervisibility and hypercommodification of women's "wellness" (Rachel O'Neill 2020), intertwined with the increasing commodification of life itself (Agenjo Calderón 2021; Wendy Brown 2015, 2019; Pérez-Orozco 2014), care work is still an intensely feminized responsibility (Agenjo Calderón 2021; Lina Gálvez Muñoz 2016; Pérez-Orozco 2006, 2014). Considering this, it is urgent to question how popular culture tells us women to take care of ourselves in a system that clearly does not care about us. For this reason, this work poses the following question: how is self-care nowadays represented and articulated in one of the most prescriptive and aspirational products in women's popular culture such as fashion and lifestyle magazines? The research starts from the hypothesis that such representation and articulation of self-care in magazines like *Vogue, Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* do not depoliticize self-care, but rather *re-politicize* it in the terms of neoliberal postfeminism—that is, they give self-care very specific political (social, cultural and economic) meaning and utility, which are identified with dominant logics/practices and gender, class and race power relations.

From "*a critical approach to postfeminism"* (Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg 2019), this article aims to participate in the conversation on self-care in the face of a multidimensional crisis from the Spanish experience and from the dialogue between cultural studies and feminist political economy in the Spanish-speaking world. The case of the Spanish State is of particular interest for two fundamental reasons. On the one hand, Spain is part of the Mediterranean or southern European familist welfare regimes, in which families—and, within them, women—are crucial for the provision of care (Pedro Rey-Araújo 2021). On the other hand, the intense popularization of feminism in the Spanish State has soaked mainstream media culture, especially since the 2018 feminist strike (Author). Thus, this

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research presents a case study of great interest that aspires to stimulate discussions and find resonances beyond national and academic borders.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, we present the theoretical-interpretative framework at the basis of the research and where feminist political economy and feminist cultural studies converge. Subsequently, the methodology used to perform the critical analysis of the discourses on self-care in the magazines *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* is briefly introduced and justified. The following section presents and discusses the main results of our work, taking postfeminism as the cardinal object of analysis. Finally, the concluding section synthesizes the key findings, followed by a short reflection on the possibility of radically feminist self-care actions.

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Theoretical-interpretative framework: the mee(l)ting of feminist cultural studies with feminist political economy

Political economy has been part of the foundations of cultural studies (Hall 1980), so theirs is far from a novel relationship. Likewise, feminism has been articulated as a meeting point between both disciplines (see, for instance, Penny Griffin 2015; Lisa McLaughlin 1999; Eileen R. Meehan and Ellen Riordan 2002), especially thanks to the efforts of feminist cultural/media studies (henceforth, FCS) (Janice Winship 2007). However, this work is committed to the interweaving of FCS and feminist political economy (henceforth, FPE), particularly that produced in the Spanish-speaking context. As described by Astrid Agenjo Calderón (2021), FPE is a lively and open field which aims to re-signify what we understand (and live) as economy, taking gender as a nuclear category of the global economy and the hegemonic culture, which, at the same time, is necessarily intersected by other axes of inequality. For this task, FPE is mixed with post-structuralist, postmodern and postcolonial feminist epistemologies, as

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well as with heterodox economic approaches that question the capitalist system and try to put the "Sustainability of Life" at the center of theoretical and political attention (Agenjo Calderón 2021; Cristina Carrasco Bengoa 2016; Pérez-Orozco 2014).

FPE amends the "patriarchal blindness" (Carrasco Bengoa 2016) and pushes the boundaries of the (post)Marxist political economy traditionally twinned with cultural studies as it actively practices breaking with what Elisabeth Prügl called "untenable dichotomies" (2020), i.e., the deeply gendered binary oppositions—masculine/feminine, but also economy–material/culture–discursive, public/private, and productive/reproductive—, which are rooted in the traditional schemes of political economy, in particular, and of sociocultural analysis, in general (Agenjo Calderón 2021; Pérez-Orozco 2014; Prügl 2020). Thus, FPE rethinks the economy as the various and complex processes destined to sustain life, taking people's *"estar-bien"* (well-being) and the enjoyment of a "good life" as measures of economic success (Agenjo Calderón 2021; Carrasco Bengoa 2016). Hyperfeminized care work, simplified as reproductive work by the Marxist tradition, is one of the most crucial life-sustaining processes.

If we analyze the shared interest of FPE and FCS in care, we observe that the theoretical-political approach of both disciplines to this issue is based on four pillars: the understanding of human (and non-human) life as vulnerable, interdependent and requiring daily care; the claim that care for life should be placed "in the center" of the economy; the critical acknowledgement of the historical hyperfeminization of care work; and the also critical consideration of care as a practice/relationship, a desire and a complex and ambivalent need—especially for women and, in particular, for the most vulnerabilized among them—, as demanding, discriminatory, even potentially reactionary, as vital, comforting and pleasant.

In this sense, both FPE and FCS seem to agree on a broad and elastic definition of care which implies enabling the sustainability of life in all its forms through the provision of enough socio-material, affective-emotional and political resources, as well as the necessary support and

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conditions to allow their daily flourishing (see, for instance, Agenjo Calderón 2021; Chatzidakis et al. 2020; Gálvez Muñoz 2016; Pérez-Orozco 2014; The Care Collective 2020). Starting from these parameters of care interwoven by FPE and FCS, self-care may be defined as a person's responsibility over the sustainability and flourishing of their own life, i.e., the practices, relationships and activities that the person performs or participates in for the purpose of satisfying (part of) their own needs and desire for care, from the most ordinary and mechanical ones to those linked to pleasure, rest or the affective-emotional and political encounter with other people.

Nevertheless, it is still difficult to find works, both in FCS and FPE, expressly focused on self-care as a buzzword. The dialogue between psychology and sociology embraced within cultural studies is probably the one that comes closest to this as it is focused on self-help, positive thinking, self-esteem and self-confidence as intensely neoliberalized artifacts that circulates in the popular postfeminist culture (Favaro 2017; Favaro and Gill 2020; Riley et al. 2019), and, specifically, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Orgad and Gill 2022). What these works do is to point out the cracks through which the conception and practice of self-care are being colonized by postfeminism (i.e., individual responsibility, anti-welfarism, pleasure, self-indulgence as an alibi for consumerism and a glamorized gendered neo-traditionalism)—a key element to analyze not only contemporary women's popular culture, but also the hegemonizing mechanisms of neoliberalism itself.

Postfeminism and the neoliberal struggle for hegemony through the representation of self-care

Feminist cultural studies have made clear the intimate relationship/identification between neoliberalism and postfeminism, the latter being understood as "a kind of gendered

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neoliberalism" and as a key analytical term for "developing a feminist critique of the interplay between gender, power and subjectivity in the neoliberal era" (Favaro and Gill 2020, 153-154). In an attempt to define a particularly slippery term, postfeminism has been identified as a "double entanglement" that conveniently embraces certain feminist gains while at the same time disavowing feminism itself (Angela McRobbie 2009, 6); as a "distinctive sensibility" which is characterized by the promotion of individualism, free choice and empowerment, the centrality of the female body, and the self-transformation and self-discipline to become profitable (Gill 2007); and as a regulation of women's working, domestic and intimate lives through traditionalist "retreatism" while fetishizing their desire, power and agency (Diane Negra 2009, 5).

From the complicity with FPE and inspired by the Gramscian tradition in cultural studies, we understand postfeminism as a mystifying narrative-device in the service of the struggle for hegemony between the neoliberal project and other antagonistic projects popularized since the Great Recession (especially the anti-capitalist feminist one), which provides partial and interested, as well as apparently more comfortable and sexier, solutions to women's needs and demands—specifically of those women who (actually or potentially) embody a hegemonic or relatively privileged position (Author, 2020, 2021). In this sense, the media and cultural circulation of postfeminism in women's self-care popular culture works for the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism in a way that is as sibylline as it is compellingly attractive, seeking not to censor or punish, but to stimulate women's willingness to *freely* self-discipline and self-manage in the name of their own wellbeing.

As a hegemonic artifact, postfeminism reinforces power logics in the sense that it is *really* useful for the lives of those women whose (economic, erotic, media) capital makes them privileged popular references (celebrities, nobility, influencers or artists, for example). However, the target audience for postfeminism is much broader insofar as it travels beyond "the

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West" and interpellates women who do not fit into the supposed postfeminist "normative subject" (Simidele Dosekun 2015), that is, white, upper/middle-class, highly educated, urbanites, normatively attractive, able-bodied and preferably heterosexual cis-women. Nevertheless, and despite the popularization of feminism and the LGBTIQ+ and Black Lives Matter movements, the recognition of diversity in mainstream lifestyle and fashion magazines continues to function as a colorful shopfront rather than as a social justice issue. Thus, even when the contents of these magazines are activated as prescriptive, aspirational and stimulating discourses for many and very diverse women, it seems that the postfeminist *good* (work, family, sexual, spiritual, consumerist, social) *life* continues to be represented in eminently normative terms and promoted as *potentially possible* only for certain women.

The discursive articulation of this postfeminist *good life* and its promises of freedom, pleasure, success, money, sexiness, power, and self-sufficiency appropriates part of the feminist key lexicon to redefine it (re-politicize it, as we explained previously) and, thus, turn it into an attractive means of neoliberal hegemony—one that does not make us think or even feel that we are *making hegemony*. This is precisely what we believe is currently happening with self-care in women's popular culture, and specifically, in fashion and lifestyle magazines.

Methodological notes

Stuart Hall said that the "cultural mission" of neoliberal capitalism is to participate in "popular culture" and "produce subjectivity" that is complicit with it (Stuart Hall and Miguel Mellino 2011, 39). Therefore, we believe that the critical analysis of popular cultural productions around self-care is a valuable tool to unravel the hegemonic meanings and interests that articulate the idea and practice of self-care—and, by extension, of femininity and wellbeing—, as well as to explore the ways in which we identify ourselves and relate to each other *through* these ideas

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and practices. More specifically, the field of research of this work is what Eva Chen (2013) has called "popular women's culture": a profoundly ambivalent media-commercial space of production and consumption, with a marked neoliberal and postfeminist tendency, and, at the same time, an attractive showcase to exhibit women's narrations, representations and experiences through the reappropriation of free choice, agency and empowerment.

This popular culture created by/for women reproduces the United States or global North cultural imperialism through its various genres, among which we can highlight *women's* fashion and lifestyle magazines, not only as a cardinal genre but as a privileged space for the analysis of the articulation and embodiment of dominant meanings and interests. *Women's* magazines represent "an emblematic case study" for feminist cultural theorists (Favaro and Gill 2020, 154) as they bring together the aspirational tropes of postfeminism, in addition to functioning as prescribers of the "new female subject" of neoliberalism (Chen 2013; also Gill 2008; Orgad and Gill 2022).

Our work studies the discourses and representations of self-care in three reference *women's* magazines in Spain: *Vogue* (Condé Nast – Condenet Ibérica), *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* (both of them owned by Hearst Magazines International – Hearst España). These are the three most widely-read monthly fashion and lifestyle magazines in Spain, in both digital and paper versions. The available audience data allow us to determine that people living in urban areas, between 35 and 54 years of age, with a medium socioeconomic status (income, educational level and employment) and, specifically, women, are the largest consumers of magazines in Spain (in print and digital format) (AIMC 2021a, 2021b).

We have conducted a search through the web archive of the three publications using the key term "self-care". This search was limited to the articles published between March 14, 2020, when the state of alarm was declared in Spain after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain, and April 2021. In order to examine the content of the articles selected, we have

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performed a critical discourse analysis from a feminist perspective (henceforth, FCDA) (Michelle Lazar 2007). FCDA shows the ways in which "gender ideology", social and personal identities, and gendered power relations are "reproduced, negotiated and questioned" through "textual representations of gender social practices and interactive conversation strategies" (Lazar 2007). In this sense, Lazar's (2007) proposal is particularly useful for this work, because it argues in favor of a FCDA that, among other issues, exposes the increasing subtlety, sophistication and complexity of gender inequalities, which coexist with renovated forms of antifeminist reaction and the cultural prevalence of postfeminism.

Discussion of results

Lockdown self-care: preliminary results

In the analysis of the three publications, we have identified two essential semantic fields or key categories to which the texts including the term "self-care" may be assigned: on the one hand, *psychological-emotional and affective wellbeing*, and, on the other, *aesthetic trends and advice* (*beauty, fashion, food and cosmetics*), the latter being the category that concentrates a larger number of articles. In any case, the volume of contents directly related to the key label or term "self-care" is not evenly distributed among the different magazines. From March 2020, *Cosmopolitan* has only published five articles including information or explicitly referring to self-care, while *Elle* and *Vogue* have published twenty-two texts (almost two per month) and thirty-eight texts (almost three per month), respectively, on that topic. Therefore, only these two magazines—or, in any case, *Vogue*—echo the discursive and cultural explosion around care following the pandemic that Chatzidakis et al. have described (2020). It is worth highlighting the case of *Vogue*, which is the magazine that more thoroughly and in a more strategic and

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coherent way has made a discursive use of self-care as a kind of buzzword cross-cutting such categories as "psychology", "mental health", "beauty" and "wellbeing".

In this sense, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the contents associated with self-care is indeed significant, because many of those articles describe, analyze or suggest routines, habits and consumptions to counteract the physical and emotional effects of the lockdown, the social restrictions or the "new normality". In fact, *Vogue* and *Elle* explicitly relate (self-)awareness of the importance of self-care to the pandemic context. In addition, the publications analyzed reflect the most viral aesthetic-cosmetic trends in social media during the lockdown months and the later gradual lifting of the restrictive measures: preparation of home-made or natural cosmetics, introduction to beauty and skin care routines, hairstyling, online purchase of clothes and cosmetics, use of anti-acne and "anti-maskne" treatments, weight loss programs and medical-aesthetical (micro)surgery.

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(Self-)care as a gendered privilege *and* mandate

The discursive uses of self-care in the magazines indicates that it is articulated as a series of intensely gendered ritual practices, mainly associated with hegemonic femininity (especially in terms of class, social and media visibility, and erotic capital). Self-care, like care work, remains as a profoundly feminized issue, practice and responsibility—a "moral imperative" for women (Riley et al. 2019, 137). Nevertheless, this hyperfeminization of self-care obscures the class and race privileges that also modulate it (Rachel O'Neill 2020). Therefore, the representation of self-care in these magazines should be examined from an intersectional perspective, because it functions eminently as a particularly exclusive/exclusionary narrative in terms of class and race, ultimately favor being a cis-woman who is white, upper/middle-class, heterosexual, urban, educated and attractive.

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This feminized representation of self-care draws from the processes of inculturation and hegemonization in capitalist and patriarchal social orders, in which the mass media play an "ideological key role", as well as a cultural one (Hall 1981, 251, 245, 238), in the essentialization of the sexual division of labor. Through the inertia and resistance of stereotypes and commonplaces in popular culture, women are socialized as *natural* and abnegated caregivers, whose purpose is to nurture the "invisible" and costless (and/or precarious) workforce that sustains not only the population's productive and supposedly self-sufficient (traditionally masculinized) lives, but also the processes of capitalist accumulation and social reproduction of capitalism itself (Carrasco 2016; Pérez-Orozco 2014; also Brown 2015).

Even if postfeminist vocabulary continues to strongly link self-care and a "well-lived life" to "hyperdomesticity" (Diane Negra 2009, 117), postfeminism has updated the appearance of this reactionary socialization via its "glamorized neotraditionalism", reinterpreting it as a freely chosen, pleasant, empowering life(style) and personal(ity) option, free from any pressure or structural inequality (Author). This has been especially visible in the social media of certain celebrities and influencers during COVID lockdown. As Rocío Palomeque Recio (2020) points out, an intensification of postfeminist and heteronormative domesticity has been noted, and taking care of others and of oneself has been performed (and commodified) as an embellished practice that does not prevent, but makes it possible to *have it all*: "[women] can be business entrepreneurs, fashion bloggers, domestic goddess and mothers; while simultaneously young, beautiful, cheerful, and sexy, even in the middle of a global pandemic." (Palomeque Recio, 2020).

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The hyperfeminized conflict between care (for others) and self-care (for oneself?)

The magazines studied usually insist on the importance of self-care as a requirement to be able to take care of others or to achieve the necessary balance between taking care of others and of oneself. Some of the articles even address the triad *taking care of others–taking care of oneself–being taken care of*, especially at home and in heteronormative relationships, although there is no critical reference to men's lack of responsibility over care. This leads to a key question: *who takes care of those who take care*? In the words of Amaia Pérez-Orozco, "those who take care, receive the least care"—less acknowledgement, less opportunities, less support—, which places women in a situation of particular socioeconomic vulnerability (2020).

The neoclassical economic paradigm usually obscures the (self)-care needs of men-workers in what has been called the "mushroom worker" myth (Pérez-Orozco 2014, 168): the neoliberal fantasy of the worker who, individually and self-sufficiently, sustains his own life from what he obtains in the marketplace, where he appears *spontaneously*, without anyone having taken care of him until he gets to his job or when he returns home. This orthodox paradigm does the same to women-caregivers, or what we may call *mushroom caregivers*, who are expected to have a natural disposition, talent and selflessness in taking care of everybody else. The reality is that, while they tend to others, women also need to be cared for by others and to take care of themselves. And they have to do it within a capitalist (neoliberal) and patriarchal (post-macho, antifeminist and postfeminist) social order, which is hostile to care and life's vulnerability in general and, in particular, to women's wellbeing and self-determination.

In consequence, women are trapped within a truly paradoxical logic of (self-)care and a conflicting, double mandate. On the one hand, women's socialization as caregivers for other people is in direct conflict with their own self-care, mainly due to patriarchy's historical denial of women's individuality (*being-for-themselves*), and their subjection to a "relational identity" (Hernando 2012, 65)—an individuality transformed, at best, into a hyperindividualism reserved

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only for (relatively) privileged women. Nevertheless, even though caregivers often neglect themselves (especially, those most vulnerabilized because of their working, class, ethnical and migrant condition), at the same time they are solely responsible for their own care (and the care of other women) and, are, in addition, the favorite subjects of popular self-care discourses.

Self-care as a women's issue—but not a structural or intersectional one

Despite the intensely gendered representation of self-care described in the previous two sections and the vocation of the magazines studied to speak to a large female audience that supposedly shares the same needs and desires, all structural explanations or contextualization of women's lack of/need for self-care, which should directly point to patriarchal and racist capitalism, are systematically removed from the articles analyzed. Although timidly and anecdotally, what seems an exception to this dynamic appears in an article published in *Vogue* under the title "Why we should stop doing things to also take care of ourselves" (Ana Morales 2020a). In this text, two experts affirm that, "for too long (centuries), women have been educated to perform care and service roles, putting the wellbeing of everyone around before one's own", while arguing that it is often "impossible [for women] to devote time to self-care", despite its importance, due to "work demands, obligations, family needs, illnesses and economic restrictions."

Likewise, the texts studied lack an intersectional perspective on the diverse experience of women which is particularly noticeable in the pieces starring celebrities. The aforementioned article as well as many others refer to the challenges of employment and/or motherhood that condition self-care from the perspective of high-ranking professionals and, especially, celebrities. We can, for instance, highlight the statements made by actresses Bella Thorne—"I am tired of using work as an excuse for not taking care of myself" (in Hattie Collins 2021)—

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and Madelaine Petsch—"I like to take time for myself, and if it takes me two extra hours to get ready in the morning, so be it" (in Sofía Lázaro 2020)—, or the pieces published in *Vogue* under the headlines "16 creatives share their self-care rituals" (Eni Subair 2020) and "Serena Williams, Victoria Beckham and other famous mothers on how to balance motherhood with beauty and self-care" (Tish Weinstock 2019). Since the vast majority of women reading these magazines *have to* work, that which Catherine Rottenberg calls a "happy work–family balance" (2018, 20) is conjured, which in fact is only happy (or even possible) for the relatively privileged ones, especially the celebrities who invoke it, and obscures the debate on co-responsibility or labor exploitation/precarity.

By articulating the discourse on self-care and women's ambivalent relation to it through the opinion of, on the one hand, experts (especially psychologists) and, on the other, celebrities, the articles studied create significant unbalance and contradictions. While the experts seem to display a better founded and complex narrative, closer as well to the socioeconomic reality of a (large) number of women who consume these publications, the experience of celebrities, which the editorial line of these magazines favor, mystifies self-care. Various authors have already referred to this phenomenon as the "celebritization of self-care" (Gaston Franssen 2020), which not only obscures intra-gender inequalities, but also inflames what Negra has called "the culture of aspirational elitism" (2009, 125). Thus, celebrities are transformed into powerful identification points through their double (re)presentation as aspirational subjects who inhabit lifestyles and bodies that are not only hegemonic, but desirable; and as accessible and mundane subjects, i.e., as *women like us*, which allows promoting their living and working conditions as accessible and achievable for the rest of us.

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No time for caring about self-care

As exposed by the *unhappy work-family imbalance* which ordinary working women face, the lack of/need for time is one of the essential tropes in the discursive articulation of self-care in the magazines analyzed. This centrality of time in relation to women's self-care is as paradoxical as it is eloquent due to the intense feminization of time poverty (resulting, precisely, from the hyperfeminization of care work, and the *conciliation* between care work and labor market work) (Margarita Vega-Rapún 2021). For instance, there are appeals to the *pleasure of small things* rhetoric in the form of micro-self-care: daily actions compacted or limited in time that can be performed in between or overlapping other everyday responsibilities and (paid/care) works—in line with the specificity of women's relationship to time using, which is characterized by pressure, simultaneity and fragmentation (Vega-Rapún 2021).

This is particularly evident when the magazines refer to psychological-emotional wellbeing: to be/feel well requires *taking care of oneself*, and self-care requires *time*. Sometimes, this need for time is made explicit (see, for instance, Carmen Lanchares 2021) and even acknowledged as difficult (Morales 2020a), even if most of the time it is obscured—together with the need for other resources, especially economic—behind specific recommendations or guidelines, such as sleeping enough and having quality sleep; watching one's diet (purchasing, cooking and eating); exercising daily (especially yoga), preferably outdoors; practicing mindfulness, relaxation or self-affirmation techniques, as well as other spiritual and self-knowledge methods; enjoying leisure time; sharing quality time with one's loved ones; even consuming quality information.

By throwing a veil on the feminization of time poverty and its structural causes or referring to it through the experience of privileged celebrities, the prescription of "finding time for oneself" becomes a self-disciplining, voluntarist rule: being-well is a personal choice and effort, independent of the individual's socioeconomic conditions or access to social and labor

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rights. Again, the texts published in *Vogue* exemplify this elitist narrative on self-care in a particularly expressive way, through the use of trending terms like "slow beauty" (Lanchares 2021), the repetition of the mantra "self-care is not a luxury, but a priority" in several of the articles, or the application of hyper-productivity techniques to self-care (Morales 2020a).

***Being beautiful* as *being well*: The aestheticization of self-care**

As represented in these magazines, taking care of oneself *naturally* combines physical-material and affective-emotional wellbeing with the aesthetic-cosmetic dimension of self-care—*Vogue* goes as far as to using the term "emotional beauty" (Morales 2020b). *Being beautiful* is identified with taking care of oneself and *being well*, and vice versa: self-care positively affects one's *being beautiful*. Moreover, in this articulation of self-care as an aesthetic-emotional (pre)occupation, two singularly contradictory narratives converge. On the one hand, in the psychological-emotional dimension, the need to be more tolerant, compassionate and kind to oneself, to love and accept oneself just as one is, and to deny the possibility, even the desirability, of perfection are emphasized. On the other, in the properly aesthetic dimension, all cosmetic prescriptions aim at self-transformation for the purpose of improving and correcting oneself, a process that should provide pleasure and wellbeing per se and in relation to a fictitious final outcome toward which one is, paradoxically, working non-stop. A paradigmatic example of the confluence of these two contradictory discourses in these magazines is found in their weight-loss-related contents, which have changed the usual aggressiveness of the diet culture and radical fatphobia for an argument that connects health and wellbeing to thinness. In this sense, self-care would alleviate this conflict as it brings "inherently flawed femininity and postfeminist perfection, together" (Riley et al. 2019, 32).

Self-care is depicted as an intimate practice or ritual subjected to beauty mandates and canons that stimulate women's "aesthetic labor" (Ana S. Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina M.

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3 Scharff 2017) and, by extension, their erotic capital, i.e., their (exchange) value in the "sexual
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5 economy" and the affective-sexual, romantic and labor markets (Kristen Ghodsee 2019, 100).
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7 This subjection of self-care to aesthetic parameters reproduces a profitable ideal of beauty,
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9 eminently identified with bodies that are white and slender, apparently able-bodied and free
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11 from *imperfections* (i.e., sexually available, desirable and visible within the heteronormative
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13 framework), or, at best, with bodies that (partially or totally) deviate from this norm but are
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15 intensely exoticized, eroticized and conveniently aestheticized in line with the
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17 spectacularization and cosmetic celebration of diversity in popular media.
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19 In addition, the very aestheticization of self-care observed in our analysis compulsively
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21 links self-care and integral personal wellbeing with specific aesthetic-cosmetic practices
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23 (which, in turn, produce specific aesthetic outcomes, identified with the above-mentioned ideal
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25 of beauty). Beyond using comfortable and flattering clothes or taking care of one's personal
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27 hygiene, magazines prescribe, above all, the use/purchase of parfum and cosmetics designed to
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29 *enhance* one's skin, as well as diets, weight-loss programs and *fitness* routines, trendy fashion
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31 and make-up.
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33 This way, the classical dichotomy between individuality *(being-for-oneself*) and
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35 relationality (*being-for-others*) (which fits so well with the also traditional masculine–feminine
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37 dichotomy) (Almudena Hernando 2012) is strained, confused and complicated by the
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39 hegemonic cultural articulation of female self-care: taking care of oneself cannot be understood
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41 anymore as an exercise of individuality or *being for oneself*, but becomes a relational and
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43 heteronormative mandate to *be (available and desirable) for others*.
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Buying our way out to wellbeing: self-care commodification and aspirational indebtedness

The articulation of women's self-care in the form of aesthetical practices are closely related to the identification of women as intensive and decisive consumers (Banet-Weiser 2015; Banet-Weiser Gill and Rottenberg 2019; Negra 2009), insofar as all aesthetic self-care practices recommended in the publications analyzed necessarily imply a constant and cumulative consumption of cosmetic products and services— in fact, a significant percentage of the articles analyzed are sponsored by cosmetic or fashion brands. In addition, as the magazines stimulate "aspirational consumerism" through celebrity culture (Negra 2009, 2, 7), *wanting/being able* to maintain this cadence and level of consumerist self-care connects with the neoliberal financialization of everyday life (Adkins 2018; Agenjo Calderón 2021; Brown 2015, 2019).

Even if the magazines increasingly offer affordable cosmetic alternatives to their readers (using the strategy of mentioning that such products are the celebrities' "favorite" or "basic" choice), this trend coexists with the growing practice of microfinancing micro aesthetic consumption and interventions. Medical aesthetic clinics are offering this kind of treatments (especially facial surgery, breast augmentation, laser depilation and micro-liposuction), while multi-brand cosmetic firms like Primor allow their clients to finance their purchases through monthly payments. In this sense, women's triple role in the beauty market, as consumers, products and workers, reflects as well the increasing precarity of their working conditions, especially those of the most vulnerable ones, who sustain self-care industries with their work (from the often-delocalized production/manufacturing phases to sales and services).

Likewise, the creation and rise of "the market of self-esteem" (Gaston Franssen 2020), pumped by the compulsive postfeminist confidence culture (Banet-Weiser 2015; Favaro and Gill 2020; Orgad and Gill 2022), proposes young and adult women the acquisition of "symbolic goods" that will enhance their self-image and self-confidence, in line with the capitalist invocation of the "magical power of consumption" denounced by Silvia Federici (in Beatriz

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Plaza and Erika González 2015). In this sense, Holly Lewis's reflection is absolutely pertinent when she claims for women's "right to self-determination" as something that should be collectively defended and politicized (as well as include "the right to decide on trivialities such as clothing and make-up"). But Lewis explains: "this self-definition by no means requires the purchase of consumer goods; however, the market certainly exploits women's desire for self-determination as it exploits all desire" (2016, 98).

The neoliberal exploitation of the "diseases of the soul" (Silvia L. Gil 2011, 226), i.e., of the needs and ill-being that neoliberal capitalism creates by itself, has become increasingly inventive, attractive and invasive, while interlocking with other axes/systems of inequality, particularly with the (economic-employment, physical-aesthetic and psychological) (d)effects that patriarchy projects onto women. This is precisely why, as explained by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015), the target population of the empowerment market are young women who, according to Sarah Banet-Weiser, are paradoxically and simultaneously portrayed as girls "in crisis" and "powerful consumers".

Thus, the commodification of women's self-care should be understood in connection with the relationship of dependence between wellbeing and individual consumption capacity as conventionally articulated by capitalist economics and its neoclassical academic correlate (Pérez-Orozco 2014). In addition, it should also be understood as a way for these women and girls in crisis to *correct* themselves through the resources of the labor and consumer market. Then, consumerism represents an essential means for women's self-transformation toward an hypercommodified wellbeing in the context of neoliberal capitalism and postfeminist culture.

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Disciplinary self-care: Towards the privatization of wellbeing

Neoliberal anti-welfarism promotes the privatization and individualization of structural inequalities as personal problems/defects that need to be overcome/corrected through self-transformation and self-disciplining practices—which are mostly performed in the market, as indicated before. In this sense, the representation of women's self-care in the magazines studies reproduces this logic. Access to wellbeing is restricted and determined by each woman's socioeconomic conditions, which encourages a re-politicization of wellbeing as personal comfort and privilege. By extension, it also enables the re-politicization of ill-being as an individual responsibility or guilt resulting from each woman's lack of effort or initiative.

In addition, the discursive articulation of self-care reflects an eminently utilitarian and productive conception of the term and its practice: through self-care, women are constantly working on themselves and are self-transformed to optimize themselves and maximize not only their wellbeing, but also their human, economic and erotic capital—what Laura Favaro (2017) epitomizes as the neoliberal governmentality of the "confidence chic". In Foucauldian terms, subjects' "capacity for 'self-care'" under neoliberalism then works as "the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions" (Brown 2005, 42 in Favaro and Gill 2020, 154; also Favaro 2017).

The economic-cultural significance of self-care articulated in *women's* magazines implies a connection between self-transformation practices and self-disciplining routines in the context of neoliberal capitalism, where the management of the self is a privileged space for the intimate governmentality of neoliberalism and its social and economic control processes (Brown 2015, 2019). Gill (2008) goes as far as affirming that women are the "ideal subjects" of neoliberalism, inasmuch as they are impelled to self-transform themselves and adjust their subjectivities and their lives to a much larger extent than men. This cultural articulation of self-care exposes the "economization of femininity" (Adkins 2018, 472-473), but also the

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feminization of the *homo economicus* (Author), in line with what several authors have called "feminism's neoliberal subject" (Adkins 2018, 472; Rottenberg 2018): a new *self-entrepreneured* woman integrated in the neoliberal-mercantile logic that reinterprets structural gender inequalities as individual issues that need to be addressed through personal and creative self-transformation initiatives (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2019; Rottenberg 2018).

On the other hand, Valerie Walkerdine argues that the demands of the new labor markets—characterized by the reorganization of work toward flexibility, full availability, temporariness, technologization, hyper-productivity and the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life (Agenjo Calderón 2021, 212-213)—are regulated through new self-care and self-governance techniques (2009). Taking into consideration that these work reorganization processes lead to an increase in inequalities that add to women's already devalued employment opportunities and working conditions and to the feminization of labor (Agenjo Calderón 2021), it seems that, in line with what Gill has stated, women are in fact the main target of this hyper-productivist instrumentalization of self-care.

Thus, from our analysis, the discursive articulation of self-care is self-disciplining in the sense that, even though taking care of oneself represents a direct conflict with patriarchal capitalism, the vast majority of the prescribed self-care practices require women's personal readjustment to the neoliberal precarity of their living and working conditions to (fictitiously, partially or temporarily) ease the *illnesses* that patriarchal capitalism generates in them and continue being active and useful in the productive/reproductive processes. In this sense, self-care is represented as a series of individualized practices contributing to or, at least, not threatening hegemonic femininity, the sexual/gendered division of labor and neoliberal capitalism itself.

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Conclusions: Self-care to brighten life

From the mee(l)ting of feminist cultural studies with feminist political economy, this work has aimed to critically analyze the representation and articulation of self-care in the Spanish editions of *Vogue, Cosmopolitan* and *Elle*. Firstly, we can highlight the paradoxical representation of self-care as a gender(ed) mandate, modulated as well in terms of class and race/ethnicity (among other axes of inequality), that exposes a critical conflict for most women between taking care of others and caring for oneself, and between self-care and participation in the labor and consumer markets. This conflict is fueled by the sexual division of labor, traditional gender socialization and the feminization of labor and of time poverty. In spite of this, the texts analyzed extirpate any structural political-economic reflection, as well as they evidence the absence of an intersectional gaze by habitually placing celebrities as relatable and desirable subjects.

The following main results are also pointed out: the identification of self-care with consumption practices, especially aesthetic-related ones, which intimately link women's integral wellbeing to the reproduction of beauty canons; the individualization and privatization of women's relationship with their own wellbeing through the market, which transform self-care into anti-welfare, privileged practices; and, finally, the signification of self-care as a utilitarian and hyper-productive dynamic that enables constantly working on oneself for the purpose of (self)transforming and optimizing oneself, i.e., as a self-disciplining practice. For all these reasons, we can conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic has both increased the visibility and importance of (self-)care *and* revealed a re-politicization of women's self-care. This re-politicization is in line, on the one hand, with the neoliberal postfeminist *ethos* and, on the other, with the tensions between women's *aspirational wellbeing* and precariousness, hyper-productivity at work/home, time poverty and neo-traditionalist mandates/desires.

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In the words of Audre Lorde, taking care of oneself in the framework of neoliberal capitalism, which is *also* patriarchal and racist, "is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (in Ahmed 2014). Lorde's words powerfully expose how self-care is meant and practiced differently by those who, to quote Ahmed (2014), "are not supposed to live" so that they "have to look after themselves because they are not looked after". Nevertheless, a feminist ethic of self-care should fight for (be) something more than mere survival and a supplement to the carelessness of others: it must de-feminize, de-privatize and de-individualize self-care in order to put the sustainability of life at the center, and, by doing so, provide (not only) women with the resources, conditions and capabilities required to live lives that are worth the joy of living.

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April, 11th 2022

Changes introduced to Last Version:

Once again, I want to thank the reviewers and editors, as well as express my deeply respect for their work. This third version is more accurate and mature than the previous ones.

I have tried to heed most of your recommendations and integrate them in this new versión. At times, this has been quite difficult since I was asked to reduce the length of the work and, at the same time, to introduce new bibliography and develop certain topics. On the other hand, some recommendations, even though they have been taken seriously into consideration, have not been incorporated into this updated version considering that they would move my text/proposal away from its original intention, as I try to argue below.

The following are the changes introduced in the latest version of the article, which have been highlighted in green in the main document.

For Peer R

Reviewer 1's comments

First, I have significantly reduced the length of the text (from 8,940 to 8,193 words, and from 32 to 30 pages). In addition, the sections of the theoretical framework and the presentation and discussion of results have been rearranged and readjusted; in the latter, the contents have also been reorganized and new subheadings have been added, so that the text has gained in cohesion. Finally, regarding the grammatical correction of the text, it is important to clarify that my mother tongue is not English and that this work only had funding for the translation of its original version. I am trying to do my best, but I lack funds to revise/translate each of the revised versions (this is the second revision). Therefore, at this time I can only offer my commitment and my financial effort to submit the text for review by a native professional (which I have no doubt it needs) if it is selected for publication. I am deeply sorry that this is the case, and I am aware that I am closing myself off from opportunities.

Reviewer 2's comments

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I am sincerely grateful for the references suggested by the reviewer, which have been integrated and acknowledged in the text. However, I would like to clarify that all these references are very closely related to the field of psychology-sociology, which is neither my field of expertise nor the focus of this paper. My article aspires to contribute to the beginning/strengthening of a dialogue between feminist cultural studies and feminist political economy, since cultural studies has "always" dialogued with (post)Marxist political economy, but "never" with feminist political economy. In this sense, in the theoretical-interpretative framework section I have specified what is particularly interesting about feminist political economy for feminist cultural studies and, specifically, for the analysis of (self-)care work. Moreover, the vast majority of the economic references in the theoretical framework and discussion belong to Spanish-speaking feminist economists (Cristina Carrasco, Astrid Agenjo, Amaia Pérez-Orozco, Lina Gálvez, Margarita Vega...) that I have not found in cultural studies articles so far. I think the article offers a good balance between these references and emblematic authors of the Anglo-Saxon field of cultural studies.

On the other hand, as Reviewer 2 points out, that other academic fields (such as psychology-sociology) have come to the same conclusion that self-care has been put to work for neoliberal capitalism is almost *natural* if that analysis is made from the critique of postfeminism. But I don't think this invalidates the value of works that attempt to join this conversation, especially when they step outside the intensely published Anglo-Saxon circuit. Nevertheless, following the recommendation of Reviewer 2, the novelty/originality of the article has been rethought, including in the text that it aims to contribute to the critical conversation on self-care in the context of a multidimensional crisis from the Spanish experience and from the dialogue between cultural studies and feminist political economy in the Spanish-speaking world. Thus, it aspires to offer a reflection, if not radically new, then broader than the conventional centrality of Anglo-Saxon territories and references, without losing sight of transnational convergences.

Another of the major changes suggested was to reframe the article around the pandemic, although the text already takes COVID as a backdrop or context, which is pointed out as a powerful accelerator of the popularization of self-care, especially in the Spanish context. Although I appreciate the suggestion, making the pandemic now the focus or analytical *raison d'être* of the article would make this manuscript a completely different work from what it is.

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In response to the reviewer's doubt, it was made clear in the introduction that postfeminism is not used as a perspective of analysis, but rather as an object of analysis— just as the reference authors of cultural studies do. For this reason, part of the article is devoted to explaining what we mean by postfeminism and its relation to neoliberalism.

Regarding Vogue's "feminist turn", as a regular reader of the Spanish edition, I must clarify that such a turn is not as notable or constant as the reviewer indicates in other editions. Fashion and normative beauty contents continue to predominate, and, in any case, the Vogue Business section stands out in the Spanish edition. Therefore, I cannot share the reviewer's reflection regarding other international editions of the magazine.

Finally, footnote 3 has been integrated into the main text to give it more prominence in the analysis, as suggested by reviewer 2; "aesthetic status" has been replaced by aesthetic labor, acknowledging the work of Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff; and "mushroom worker" has been briefly explained.

*****

Heartfelt thanks to the reviewers. I hope this updated version meets your expectations and those of Feminist Media Studies.

Only