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Discourses of Self-Care in Women's Online Media:

A Case Study of Refinery29 and HelloGiggles

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Abstract

This thesis addresses current discourses of self-care in women's digital media. Using a thematic discourse analysis framework informed by intersectional poststructural feminism, I analyze of twenty-six articles across two publications, Refinery29 and HelloGiggles. I argue that three themes are commonly presented in content about self-care throughout these publications: self-care as consumption, the self as a project, and critique of self-care. While discourse around self-care is varied and contains contradictions within itself, these themes predominantly work to produce and celebrate the feminine entrepreneurial subject, who seeks to improve themselves endlessly to survive the individuated landscape of late capitalism.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Theory and Methodology	4
<i>Theory: Feminist Poststructuralism and Intersectional Feminist Media Studies</i>	4
<i>Methodology: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis</i>	7
<i>Data Collection</i>	9
<i>Project Limitations</i>	11
Chapter 3: Literature Review	13
Self-Care	13
Neoliberalism, Postfeminism, and the Entrepreneurial Subject	17
Empowerment and Consumerism	20
Positivity and Resilience	22
Conclusion: The Self Caring Entrepreneurial Subject?	25
Chapter 3: Analysis	26
Self-Care as Consumption	26
The Self as a Project	30
Critique of Self-Care	35
Conclusion	38
Chapter 4: Conclusion	40
References	43

Chapter 1: Introduction

Self-care is a topic that has been gaining popularity and exposure in the media lately. It is a subject that is difficult to pin down a direct definition for but loosely consists of different practices that one can engage in to care for oneself. It is a popular term in women's media as well as on social media. Prior to starting this project, I had been interested in self-care from a personal angle for a long time and spent a lot of time thinking of different things I could do in my leisure time to make me feel happy and productive. Over time and through engaging more critically with media in my studies I became interested in the way that self-care is discursively constructed in the media, and the way that it is framed. We might consider self-care as a gendered term, promoted predominantly to women and not men. As with many forms of self-help and self-improvement, self-care seems to be a feminized practice. And as such, I wanted to examine the ways in which it is constructed and may further dominant and hegemonic views about contemporary womanhood. The question I seek to address with this research is: How is self-care discursively constructed in Refinery29 and HelloGiggles?

In order to understand and explore the topic of self-care I engaged in a discourse analysis informed by a feminist poststructural perspective. My object of analysis for this thesis is twenty-six articles from two online women's publications, Refinery29 and HelloGiggles. These websites are of particular interest to me due to them being publications that started out digital and are easily accessible to readers, with no paywalls or subscriptions being necessary to access content. Additionally, both have large readerships and have been acquired by larger traditional media companies and have a target audience of young women.

Despite the many meanings associated with the term, self-care is a term that has roots in black feminist activism, and that remains the most radical way to view the concept of self-care. It has also been considered in terms of medical discourse and more recently in many types of media targeted toward feminine subjects. This presentation of self-care in both dominant and social media is often rooted in the ways that products can be marketed and sold to a specific demographic, which consists primarily of girls and young women. Despite the origins of self-care being grounded within a community of Black Americans, it is now a term that is often used in conjunction with other discourses around lifestyle, leisure, and health targeting primarily white and middle-class audiences.

I was interested in the presentation of self-care in women's digital publications because it is one of the ways that many young women access information and it's a medium that I personally consume. Women's publications have many prescriptive elements, and much of the strength of women's publications historically, has been in their how-to approach (Farrell, 2011). Often these publications seek to fulfil the role of a "trusted friend" (Dotdash Meredith, 2021) who will recommend products and give advice for living your best life. These publications are typically owned by larger corporations that have commercial interests at stake when recommending products for purchase.

In my research I noticed that self-care is also often constructed to sell products within these publications. This commercial nature also opens the door for critiques on self-care, and who is called upon to discuss the topic. I was curious to see who was called upon to talk about self-care, what these conversations looked like, and what ideologies were underlying these conversations. In intersectional feminism, there is often an emphasis on forms of privilege, and I wanted to examine the ways in which self-care has different meanings for different groups

depending on their socially situated positions. As a young middle-class white woman, I was interested perhaps in the ways in which these discourses are often presented for women like me, at the exclusion of other marginalized or racialized groups.

Chapter Two: Theory and Methodology

Theory: Feminist Poststructuralism and Intersectional Feminist Media Studies

This research project is informed by a feminist poststructural perspective, while being attuned to intersectional feminist politics and fourth wave feminism. Contemporary feminist media studies are often informed from a post structural theoretical perspective, which “challenge[s] gender essentialism by understanding reality as given meaning through social forces” (Harvey, 2019, pg. 3). Rather than focusing on gender as a deterministic construct, which would be to consider gender as something that is inborn and determined by biological factors, this approach considers the ways that gender is socially constructed through discourse. Weedon (1987) defines discourse as:

“ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them.

Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (p. 108)

Discourses produce knowledge, and they do that in three ways: they enable, constrain, and constitute (Storey, 2018). This means that discourse not only impacts what one says, but what one does not say, and the way that one is situated. Producing knowledge of something also produces power, and power is what produces reality by creating the truths and commonplaces that we live by (Storey, 2018). In this way, discourses shape how we think, and therefore how we act.

Discourse often reflects the views of those who are dominant and seeks to reinforce and reproduce dominance and cultural hegemony in many areas, including in regard to gender. Hegemony is the way that the ruling class uses culture to maintain their positions of power through articulating their ideas as “commonsense” (Storey, 2018). Van Dijk (2015) posits that discourse control usually aims at “controlling the intentions, plans, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and ideologies – as well as their consequent actions – of recipients” (pg. 472). At times, discourse is aimed at influencing the thoughts and beliefs of everyday people. Our opinions of gender are in part shaped by cultural hegemony, which seeks to reproduce the dominant ideology that constrains people to a binary view of gender that reinforces “natural” traits associated with gender and upholds the patriarchy. However, discourse is not simply expressing a one-way flow of power, rather power is something that flows through society. Foucault (2009) states that “where there is power there is resistance” (p. 315). Discourse also offers us the tools to communicate, to oppose dominant discourses which may be oppressive or reductive, and to critically read texts for their implications and underlying ideologies. This can also be expressed through the practice of discourse analysis, which is often situated in concerns about equality and social justice.

Building upon this theoretical orientation, feminist analysis refutes the naturalized norms of gender, rather seeking to understand the ways that gender is discursive and the way that heteronormative systems are upheld and reinforced through discourse. Rather than being something biologically determined, gender is instead considered a subjectivity which is how we are situated within relations of power (Harvey, 2019). Harvey (2019) also suggests that these power relations normalize some behaviors, while framing others ‘as unnatural.’ Judith Butler (1990) articulated the performative aspects of gender, and that rather than through the body,

gender is enacted as the repetitions of gendered performance. The dominance of these performances is how gender identities and compulsory heterosexuality become normative. These performances and subjectivities become hegemonic through their constant reinforcement in various forms of media.

I also approach my research from an intersectional perspective. The concept of intersectionality was articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who argues that viewing race and gender as separate and unrelated categories is reductive and does not accurately account for the experiences of those at the axes of oppression. For example, a black woman experiences the world very differently from a white woman, and although both face struggles for being women, black women also face a unique set of issues due to being both women and black. Rather, “intersectionality considers the way that systems of oppression such as patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and capitalism as interlocking and as disadvantaging individuals at multiple axes of identity (Harvey, 2019, p. 19). It is important to bring all these different aspects into a feminist media analysis because oppression is experienced differently based on the difference in these axes and intersections.

I will also be considering feminism from a contemporary perspective. There is much talk made of the multiple waves of feminism, and how there is significant overlap in the waves. Primarily, the first wave focused on suffrage, the second on family roles and bodily autonomy, and the third on individual agency (Harvey, 2019). My focus will be on the fourth wave the perspective of feminism, which is characterized by forms of online and networked feminisms, this is due to the online and networked nature of my object of analysis. Additionally, the fourth wave of feminism also accounts for the cultural moment of “popular feminism” as defined by Banet-Weiser (2019), where feminism is now more prominent than ever, but also seeks to negate

the political aspects of feminism, focusing instead on individual empowerment. Banet-Weiser (2019) concludes that popular feminism is accompanied by popular misogyny, in which there is an equal backlash against the current wave of feminist thought. This is a useful aspect of the theory for analyzing content in women's magazines, as often there is an undercurrent of feminism that is more about individual empowerment than engaging in practices and actions that will promote structural change.

Methodology: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the analytic tool I will be using to examine both the text and image components of my selected sources. CDA is “discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power-abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). An important property of CDA is that it aims its focus at social problems and political issues and considers the way that these social problems are replicated through talk and text (p. 467). Much of the method of a CDA is identifying a social issue, analyzing how language is perpetuating that issue, and suggesting how it could be rectified with alternative language usage (Wodak, 1999, p. 187). Another way of considering discourse analysis is to consider the ways that things are said as being potential solutions to problems, the analyst should identify the problems present and how what is said constitutes a solution (Widdicombe, 1993). Fairclough identifies four stages of undergoing a CDA which are focusing on the semiotic aspects of a social wrong, identifying obstacles to addressing the wrong, considering if society needs the wrong, and considering ways to overcome the obstacles (2013, p. 13). I chose to use critical discourse analysis as my method

of analysis because of its emphasis on social construction and its interest in power relations and potential solutions to societal problems.

Critical discourse analysis is employed by scholars in multiple disciplines and may even be described as transdisciplinary (Van Dijk, 2015) which was a factor in why I selected it as my tool of analysis. This will be useful as I expect to find themes within my analysis that operate within multiple theories and contexts, so I value the flexibility of CDA for this purpose.

Specifically, my CDA will be a feminist one, because the gendered aspects of self-care are of specific interest to me. The aim of a feminist CDA is to examine the “ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). Lazar (2007) articulates that it is important to establish a form of CDA that specifically employs feminist principles in theorizing and analyzing the nature of gender. This is of particular importance because the ideologies of gender and asymmetry of power relations is increasingly subtle, potentially especially so in publications that are marketed specifically to women.

Conducting a feminist CDA of these texts will increase understanding of the balance between commercial interests, neoliberal values, ideologies of gender and earnest advice that these digital media outlets are achieving and which of these aspects is favored in the writing. Using a feminist CDA will allow me to consider all these elements through a critical feminist lens which is focused on the gendered meanings that are constructed through these articles. Coming into this project, I suspect that my findings will likely have some overlap with other research conducted on women’s media, particularly regarding imperatives toward positivity, and

other aspects of self-discipline which are themes in much of the existing literature (Gill, 2021; Riley et al, 2019; Scharff 2016b).

Data Collection

This project examines articles from two online women's magazines, Refinery29 and HelloGiggles. Refinery29 (<https://www.refinery29.com>) was founded in 2005 by Justin Stefano, Piera Gelardi, Christene Barberich, and Phillippe von Borries and was acquired by VICE Media in 2019 (Vice Media Group, 2019). It describes itself as a “a catalyst for women to see, feel, and claim their power. We are the leading next-gen media and entertainment company focused on YOU—women pushing the status quo, in your lives and in the world” (Refinery29, n.d.) After its acquisition by VICE Media, the website expanded its global footprint and now offers region specific content. After the acquisition by VICE Media, it is difficult to get the specific amount of traffic to the site, however in a previous press graphic they state that their audience has a median age of 32, has a median income of \$88,000 USD annually, and is 70% female (Refinery29, 2017).

HelloGiggles (<https://hellogiggles.com/>) was founded in 2011 by Zoey Deschanel, Sophia Rivka Rossi, and Molly McAller and was later acquired by Time Inc. in 2015 (Shontell, 2015). In 2017, Time Inc. was acquired by Meredith Group, which now boasts that it is Americas largest print and digital publisher. Meredith Group now has almost 200 million monthly readers across their many platforms (Dotdash Meredith, 2018). On the Meredith website HelloGiggles is described as “like a trusted friend – HelloGiggles is relatable, sharable, and inclusive” (Dotdash Meredith, n.d.). HelloGiggles now even has a print issue which is issued biannually and sent to subscribers of People, as well as being available at certain retailers (Dotdash Meredith, 2018).

This publication has a monthly footprint of 3.5 million unique views and 5.5 million monthly views (Dotdash Meredith, n.d.).

There were several factors that went into my decision to choose HelloGiggles and Refinery29 as my objects of analysis. I chose to analyze articles from these websites due to their target demographic of young women. Another factor in my decision was that these texts are ones that I grew up reading and are still being updated. However, one of the most appealing aspects of these websites in conducting my analysis is that they are freely available websites that can be accessed by anyone online and do not require any type of subscription. I was interested in material that was widely available and easily accessible because that allows the site to have the widest reach possible. The final factor in choosing these publications is that they produce a frequent and varied amount of content on self-care, which is the most significant reason that I chose to analyze materials from these websites.

In order to collect the data for my analysis, I used the internal search functions on each of the websites. I searched the term “self-care” within quotes and selected the first 13 articles from each search that contained the search term in the title of the article. Verifying that self-care was in the title of the article rather than pulled from the text helped to ensure that the articles pulled would be most relevant to the topic I am analyzing. Initially, I had stated that I was only interested in selecting articles from the previous two years to situate my research within the present period, but that was not necessary as none of the articles I retrieved were older than 2019. I was interested only in more recent articles because I wanted self-care content from this specific moment in time in the event that there were any themes relating to COVID-19 pandemic.

To analyze the articles and themes within them, I read each of the twenty-six articles four times. In my initial reading, I made general notes on each article. In my second reading, I began to identify common themes across the articles, after working with those themes and discussing them with my supervisor I finalized three identified themes. I then established codes based on three identified themes: (1) self-care as consumption, (2) self-care as an ongoing project, and (3) critiques of self-care. In my third reading, I was able to code each article more definitely, finalizing key analytic themes and pulled quotes to use for writing my analysis chapter.

Project Limitations

There are two main limitations I see with my project. The first limitation of this project is that the scope is quite limited, due to the scope of a BA Honours project I am only able to analyze about 26 articles across the two publications, so this truly only such a small amount of the literature on self-care that is available and only covers a small number of publications that publishes content on this topic. The second limitation I suggest is a limitation of the method proposed by Van Dijk (2015), which is that it is difficult to strike a balance between a critique of power and a detailed discourse analysis. As I am not trained in linguistics or literature my analysis will skew more towards a critique of power, however, as a critical communications scholar I am most interested in the ways in which power is expressed through these texts, but I do acknowledge that I will not be able to provide a detailed linguistic analysis of the texts. However, that is an area that could be fruitfully explored by additional research. Another area for continued research on these texts is considering the way that discourses around self-care are framed on social media. Despite the areas that I will not be able to cover extensively, I will be

able to provide a detailed and culturally situated semantic analysis of the themes present in these and how they connect with other trends in communications.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

In order to situate my research within a scholarly context, I have conducted a literature review around the topic of self-care, self-help, and their neoliberal and postfeminist implications. Self-care and self-help are interrelated topics, and significantly more research has been conducted on self-help materials, so I have incorporated it into my research as well. I open this chapter with an introduction to self-care, its roots as a term and some context on how its usage has changed over time. I will then delve into the concept of the entrepreneurial subject and neoliberalism. Drawing on neoliberal and feminist theory I will discuss the transformation through consumption, due to the often-commercial nature of self-care articles. Finally, I will discuss the ways in which the feminine entrepreneurial subject is constructed through discourses of resilience and positivity.

Self-Care

Self-care is a term that has gone through a lot of changes in meaning. Initially it has roots in the medical community, referring to the way that patients can care for themselves and their medical conditions, often taking the form of developing healthy habits (Harris, 2017). This form of medical care was intended for elderly people or those in long-term care (Harris, 2017). The term is still used in medical communities when considering supplementary care that patients can actively participate in, and now has extended to patients with chronic health conditions (Harris, 2017). In the 1960s and 1970s the term was taken up by civil rights activists and those in the women's movement, including black feminists who have employed the concept as a corrective force against the patriarchal and racist institution of medicine (Harris, 2017). We can see this particularly in the writing of Audre Lorde around her care routine when going through painful

cancer treatment in her essay, “A Burst of Light”. Hooks also reckons with care and how love and self-love are tools that can help us resist falling into a pattern of “hedonistic consumerism” (1999 p. 71). More recently Angela Davis has discussed the importance of self-care, stating that “self-care and healing and attention to the body and the spiritual dimension – all of this is now a part of radical social justice struggles. This wasn’t the case before” (Quoted in Van Gelder, 2016). The idea is that before you care for others you must first care for yourself, so in that way caring for the self is a radical act that can accompany and enhance political activism.

Additionally, women are frequently under the imperative to provide care for others, whether through providing care labor in the workplace or in the cultural institution of motherhood. This shift in considering caring for the self as important, or potentially more important than caring for others challenges traditional gender roles.

Self-care has taken on a broader meaning in more recent times. Rosalind Gill (2021) suggests we are currently in the development of a “self-care society” particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increased emphasis on discourses of positivity and practicing self-care. Gill (2021) uses the term “self-care society” to illustrate the ways in which neoliberal notions are becoming increasingly enmeshed into our everyday lives. Gill (2021) also emphasizes that these messages promoting self-care do acknowledge stress and difficulty and at times even highlighting gendered experiences and the effects of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, these messages still are proposing solutions to these problems that are often individual, psychological, or commercial in nature. Gil (2021) considers self-care as a “positivity imperative” which is part of a larger trend of new sentimentalism, a trend that is characterized by the increasing discourses of hope, gratitude and resilience.

Gill also discusses the distinction between self-help and self-care. There is a lot of overlap between the concepts of self-help and self-care, this overlap and the distinction between the two will be useful to keep in mind throughout this literature review. Self-help is now beginning to blur with other formats. There is also a morphing of “self-help discourses into injunctions of self-care which are not only more expansive by also marked by the space they allow for difficult experiences and feelings including failure and vulnerability” (Gill, 2021). Gill states that “self-care” is a phenomenon that has wider reach than self-help as a concept, also allowing space for difficult feelings such as failure and vulnerability (2021). It is also argued that self-help is no longer confined to books or articles but encompasses a wide variety of lifestyle media that entertains, shows us different ways of living, and is at times meant to inspire self-transformation (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Essentially, discourses of self-help can fit into self-care, however self-care has a larger range and reach, spreading into more areas of life with a more pronounced connection to general wellness.

We are in a time where we are concerned with care more than ever, and how it affects us in our day-to-day lives. This concern arises partially due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gill, 2021), but it also seems to have roots in the 2016 election of Donald Trump from a more North American perspective (Harris, 2017). Self-care can be seen as a symptom and a solution to social deficits created by late capitalism (Hobart & Kneese, 2020). An example for self-care as a symptom of these social deficits given by Hobart & Kneese (2020) is the ways that remedies to hyperproductivity are commodified in the forms of gym memberships, specialized diets, therapies and other forms of individual optimization. Hobart & Kneese also consider it a potential solution because recent theoretical intervention “extends the potentialities of self-care outward to include other forms of care that push back against structural disadvantage” (2021).

Although this care may not be able to completely disengage from structural inequalities it can present care that nourishes and allows individuals and groups to survive in circumstances that challenge their existence (Hobart & Kneese, 2021).

Care is also something that has an intersectional aspect and is embedded with class and gender considerations. Some examples of the class and gendered dimensions to care are in the roles of caregiving, as these roles are often occupied by women of color who may not have the same access to temporal and financial resources when seeking to care for themselves, and in being unable to care for themselves may be considered “non-compliant” and deemed unworthy of care from others (Hobart & Kneese, 2020). Hobart & Kneese (2020) also consider the ways in which caring for the self ensured that caring for others remains sustainable and the ways in which self-care is often co-opted by commercialization and neoliberalism. These facets of the discourses around care emphasize the financial aspects of care and often downplay the spiritual aspects.

Brown (2003) also uses the term self-care when describing the way neoliberalism interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial subjects, stating that an individual’s capacity for self-care is a measure of their “moral autonomy.” However, the way Brown uses the term self-care differs vastly from the way that we see self-care being used in a political and activist context, she describes it as “one’s ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions” (n.p.), this definition of self-care emphasizes its utility in neoliberalism, by deploying care as a means of increasing personal productivity rather than the concept of care for the sake of care or as energizing oneself for community engagement. In my analysis of articles from digital women’s publications I anticipate that this will be an underlying ideology.

Together this literature suggests that self-care as a term can have a variety of meanings and is used in many contexts. It has seen usage as medical terminology, as a tool of radical activists, and most recently has come into more common vernacular with both the possibility of resisting the current system and feeding into it as well. This disambiguation of the term will provide a useful framework through which to consider the rest of the concepts explored in my literature review. With self-care and its many uses and meanings in mind, I will now turn to a discussion of concepts that inform some of the underlying ideologies of self-care, such as neoliberalism and postfeminism and the ways in which they work together in an entrepreneurial subject.

Neoliberalism, Postfeminism, and the Entrepreneurial Subject

Neoliberalism seeks to “bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey, 2007, p. 3). However, there is no assumption that peoples conduct will automatically take on a form influenced by market values, rather there are institutional practices developed for enacting this vision (Brown, 2003). This vision of an “entrepreneurial subject” (Brown, 2003) is one in which market values are integrated into daily lives and habits, including habits of self-monitoring, constant self-improvement, and concerns with productivity and time as a resource. Even rest can be integrated into this mindset, by tracking one's sleep habits in order to perform labor more effectively. However, this entrepreneurial subject is not simply born, but is created through ideological work and hegemonic institutions. Some examples of institutions that perpetuate this entrepreneurial subject are the self-help industry and through women's media, which often acts as a how-to guide for life.

There are many overlaps between this entrepreneurial subject and a postfeminist sensibility. Gill and Scharff (2011) consider multiple meanings for the term postfeminism, I will focus on their use of postfeminism as a sensibility which considers postfeminism as an object of critical analysis. There are a variety of themes that crop in when considering postfeminism including: individualism, choice and empowerment, dominance of a ‘makeover paradigm’, an emphasis on the consumerism and commodification of difference, and the overlapping of these themes with continued inequalities relating to race, class, sexuality, and disability (Gill & Scharff, 2011). These themes correspond quite strongly with many aspects of neoliberal sensibility, both are structured by individualism, there is an overlap in the subjectivities of the neoliberal subject and the postfeminist subject, and the most significant third connection which is that in cultural discourses it is often women who are called upon to self-manage and self-discipline (Gill & Scharff, 2011).

Early work on postfeminism considers the individual nature of postfeminism and its overlaps with neoliberalism. One concept that covers this overlap well is that of “female individualization” (McRobbie, 2004) this concept refers to how the emancipation of women has led to women being dis-embedded from communities and are now required to create their own structures and ways of living (McRobbie, 2004). These new ways of living often rely on self-monitoring practices such as self-help, lifestyle content, and self-improvement TV to provide the cultural content that assists the process of individualization (McRobbie, 2004). Presently, one could argue that self-care content also falls under this umbrella. While some aspects of this article are less current now regarding the way postfeminism is now viewed as a sensibility rather than solely a backlash to feminism, the concept of female individualization and the means in which it is presented to consumers is still relevant and persistent in popular culture.

Here, it is worthwhile returning to the idea of self-help as discussed in the previous section of the literature review. Self-care and self-help are both similar concepts, which focus on suggesting ways in which the reader can improve their lives, so consideration of previous self-help literature may help identify trends in self-care content. The self-help industry makes visible the intersection of postfeminism and neoliberalism, particularly in the context of regulation of the self and the shift from self-criticism to self-love and self-care (Riley et al, 2019). The example given by Riley et al, is an analysis of the book *The Goddess Revolution* in which the reader is called to listen to their body's nutritional needs, but also is compelled to work out “like a goddess” and to treat self-care appointments like business engagements. This writing attempts to utilize the concept of body positivity while continuing to tie a woman's value to her body (Riley et al., 2019). Promoting these behaviors of self-surveillance and self-regulation tie the work of the self to good citizenship and requires women to both work on themselves in increasingly intense ways, but also to recognize this work as empowering (Riley et al, 2019). This discourse of self-surveillance and self-improvement often exists simultaneously against one of “loving yourself” creating an oscillation between what Brockling (2005) calls a “grammar of hardness” and a “grammar of care,” and often results in texts that seek to both affirm and dissolve gender stereotypes.

Self-help is one of the tools that is utilized in the construction of the entrepreneurial subject, particularly when that subject is a woman. There is a body of research exploring how women are positioned as ideal entrepreneurial subjects (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Scharff, 2016b), but how this is lived out is also worthy of consideration. Scharff (2016b) considers the psychic life of women who are classically trained musicians, in her interviews she identifies ten contours of neoliberalism which include discourses of self-competition, anxiety and self-doubt, being

active and constantly lacking time, and viewing the self as a business. Participants of this study were constantly concerned with working on themselves and often viewed themselves as a business to establish a form of distance from themselves. The aim of establishing this distance was complete this work on the self in a more formalized way, some examples of this work include participants taking care of their mental health, or ensuring that they are eating well (Scharff, 2016b). These active processes represent an attempt to make up for the precarity in their profession through constant self-regulation and the construction of an optimized version of the self (Scharff, 2016).

Empowerment and Consumerism

Throughout the rest of the literature review I draw on these analyses of postfeminism and neoliberalism to explore the ways in which the entrepreneurial subject is constructed. An aspect of the entrepreneurial self is the idea of the self as a project rather than a subject. The self is something that is constantly to be worked on and this goes beyond the cultivation of personal traits and appropriate conduct and extends to purchasing material goods. One discursively constructed form of transformation is in the act of consumption. One case study that exemplifies this is Lululemon and their marketing which folds discourses of empowerment into consumption. Consumption is treated as an activity that is empowering and is an act of constructing the self through the selection and cultivation of goods, and the linking of appropriate consumption to good citizenship (Lavrence & Lozinski, 2014). Shopping in a Lululemon store is constructed as more than an act of consumption, but as a “spa-like experience” and a “transformative purification ritual” (Lavrence & Lozinski, 2014, pp. 86-87). There is an emphasis on the way that consumption will make you feel and the experience of purchasing.

Discourses of consumption exist in all forms of media, including television. Ringrose & Walkerdine (2008) discuss consumption in terms of its prevalence in reality TV, suggesting that femininity is a site for limitless transformation and reinvention, and one of the ways that this transformation is enacted is through consumption. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) considered the class-based implications of the TV makeover paradigm, and the continuous process of making the self over in order to fit a successful postfeminist model. This is discussed in literature about self-help as well, as many self-help publications for women are described as marrying feminist sentiments of body-positivity and self-acceptance with tying women's value back to their bodies and the consumption of products (Riley et al. 2019).

This discourse of consumption is also very prominent in magazines and advertising as well. Banet-Weiser (2018) considers advertising in her discussion of girl power as being the "power to consume" (p. 47). Positioning girls as in need of empowerment and as ideal consumers has created a "market for empowerment" (Banet-Weiser, 2018), in which young girls and women are seeking empowerment. The market for empowerment exists within a larger economy of visibility, which is "affirmed within neoliberal capitalism which is dedicated to seeking out new markets and brands in all facets of life" (p. 44). This "market" is capitalized on by companies that participate in creating advertising to women that encourages body positivity and self-esteem. These messages are delivered without irony and the solution to these problems is positioned as consumption, which creates a heightened presence for these feminist products (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This type of feminist advertising fulfils a purely economic function in which feminist politics are integrated into neoliberal logic, operating to make a profit for companies selling these goods (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Building on the idea of the power to consume, there is a connection between consumption, emancipation, and freedom. In an analysis of beauty advertisements from a Singaporean magazine Lazar (2011) suggests that the connection between consumption and freedom is alive and well, and that this new emancipated femininity that one receives from consuming is an effect of a global neoliberal postfeminist discourse. She ties this discursive form to third wave feminism, and the ways in which beauty practices have been reclaimed as leisurely pursuits, and how this enables the link between the normative practice of beautification with emancipation (Lazar, 2011). This forms a new emancipated feminine identity based on consumerism and a divergence from second wave feminism which is constructed as restricting women's ability to actualize their true femininity (Lazar, 2011).

Scholars have found competing discourses about the relationship between consumption, feminism, and empowerment when talking to media producers. Gill and Favaro interviewed writers at magazines in the UK and in Spain to see the way magazines aligned themselves with feminism, many writers in the UK declared themselves feminist without any "specification about the nature or content or politics of such feminism" (2018 p. 44). And few acknowledged that the commercial nature of the magazines was more significant than feminism (Favaro & Gill, 2018). Through the studies we can see that there are a variety of discursive constructions of consumption and consumerism as a mode of change and transformation to suit a neoliberal ideal.

Positivity and Resilience

In the construction of an entrepreneurial self, there are certain traits that come up frequently, especially when the subject is a woman. Positivity and resilience are two traits that are emphasized in popular discourses in magazines and other women's media that idealize this

entrepreneurial self. There is the idea that failures are simply room for growth (Schraff, 2016b), and it is most important to have the “right” outlook to keep working. Positivity and resilience are tools that can be used to achieve and maintain this outlook and are often positioned as productive traits worthy of cultivation. As neoliberal subjects there is the expectation of being in a constant state of becoming (Brockling, 2005) and we are not only supposed to constantly undergo self-work, but we are expected to do this work in a positive and pleasant manner and to not let on if we are struggling.

One aspect of the entrepreneurial self is the imperative to cultivate resiliency. Gill & Orgard (2018) find that elasticity, affirmation, and inspiration are often used together in popular culture and media to produce a neoliberal subject able to “bounce back” from problems and setbacks. These discourses of resilience also often happen to be classed and gendered and tend to be addressed primarily to middle-class women, as those requiring social support are categorized as lacking the ability to show resilience (Gill & Orgard, 2018; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). This move to cultivating traits represents a greater emphasis on character, and this turn also requires a significant amount of individual labor, that is often goes entirely unacknowledged (Gill & Orgard, 2018). The amount of labor is why these discourses of resiliency are targeted primarily to middle class women, as often single mothers or women who require social support do not have the time or resources to engage in these forms of labor (Gill & Orgard, 2018).

In constructing the entrepreneurial subject as someone with the agency and autonomy to modify their thoughts and feelings to adapt to the world, this discourse also serves to construct the wider world as fixed and unchangeable (Riley et al, 2019). The individual is constructed as innately flawed and in need of fixing, and the work of transformation can never truly be completed (Riley, et al. 2019). Rather than encouraging subjects to consider the ways in which

they can enact social change, the onus is set on the individual to continuously better themselves to adapt to their environment.

Analyzing self-help can be a useful strategy to consider the current implications of self-care literature. In the turn towards positivity Binkley's (2011) analysis of self-help literature examines the ways in which happiness becomes a quantifiable goal and the ways that the discourses surrounding happiness have a productive effect in shaping autonomous neoliberal subjectivities. These discourses combine scientific and emotional subjectivities in such a way that casts a market perspective on even our inner emotional lives, ensuring that we are governing our emotions in a way that attempts to produce a quantifiable output. Happiness is constructed as a series of actions taken, as a regimen, and a daily undertaking. It is cast as an active task, while unhappiness is considered a byproduct of passivity and inaction (Binkley, 2011). There is even a discussion of the "fringe benefits of happiness" such as resilience and productivity at work, suggesting that even happiness is valued through this market exchange (Binkley, 2011).

Another aspect of this turn to positivity is its depoliticizing nature. When maintaining positivity is valued, we are expected to turn away from emotions such as anger and despair, which are often emotions that spur critique and desire for structural change, leading to diminished value for any form of change outside of the ones made to the self (Scharff, 2015). This is an interesting idea to consider in relation to self-care, as self-care exists within a larger imperative towards positivity (Gill, 2020). Self-care can potentially be used as a numbing tool, which soothes on an individual level and allows the entrepreneurial self to continue to focus on individual growth and development. Self-care practiced in this way is separated from its imperative towards caring for the self as a part of radical activism in which self-care is

emphasized in its importance in order to do the difficult work of collectivizing and creating change within a community.

Conclusion: The Self Caring Entrepreneurial Subject?

This literature review has pointed to the overlaps between emerging discourses of self-care and the entrepreneurial subject, a gendered subject informed by postfeminist sensibilities. I have suggested that the literature highlights that we are encouraged to care for ourselves in ways that are often informed by hegemonic ideas of a productive self who is always striving to be the best version of themselves under capitalism. This works toward a neoliberal ideal of an entrepreneurial subject; this subject is often a middle-class woman who is encouraged to cultivate traits of resilience and positivity and to participate in consumer culture in order to empower herself. As such, this research provides the necessary foundation for my own analysis of the ideological content present in self-care articles published in Refinery29 and HelloGiggles and the ways in which self-care is discursively constructed within them.

Chapter 3: Analysis

The articles on self-care from Refinery29 and HelloGiggles initially seem quite innocuous, presenting the reader with ways in which they can ostensibly practice self-care. However, there are multiple competing discourses within these articles. For example, in some discourses there are undertones of self-surveillance and implications of guilt and shame in practicing self-care. In this section I will present some common discursive themes uncovered from my analysis of twenty-six articles from Refinery29 and HelloGiggles and the ways that these themes tie into the research from my literature review, as well as some of the ways that they diverge. First, I will discuss the theme of self-care as consumption in my sampled articles. I'll then discuss my second thematic finding a discourse that positions self-care as an ongoing project and obligation. Finally, I will discuss my third theme, the critique of self-care.

Self-Care as Consumption

Through many of the articles on self-care, there is a discourse that suggests that through purchasing and consuming products and services the reader is practicing self-care. This concept is something that comes up frequently through the articles, either through directly promoting consumption or by referencing the idea that consumption is a form of self-care. One prominent style of article in these publications are simply laundry lists of products that can be bought in the name of self-care. Many of the items in these articles are expensive or at the very least somewhat luxury items, such as a meditation cushion that costs \$150 (Gilbert, 2020). At times, these articles promoting items to purchase in the name of self-care lack even a clever copy section, and simply provide a list of products that can be purchased. However, self-care as consumption is also condemned in other articles. For example, this idea is condemned in an article that also

provides suggestions for free ways to practice self-care, stating that self-care “has become commodified by the beauty and fitness industries and made into a catch-all for people being able to justify spending money because it’s ‘how they practice self-care’” (Dunn, 2020). Despite self-care being promoted as consumption in many articles, just as frequently it is derided for not being related to self-care.

Other times, there are lists of products used or sponsored by celebrities, such as the article titled, “Hilary Duff Breaks Down Her \$409 USD Self-Care Routine During Quarantine.” This article consists of a breakdown of a series of Instagram story posts from Duff about her bath routine and lists all the products she used throughout the process as well as affiliate links that can be used to purchase them. These affiliate links can be used to generate a profit for the website by directing consumers to products on certain websites, if a purchase is made using these links the publication receives a small percentage of profit from the sale. Throughout this article, Duff is presented as a friendly relatable figure, with her Instagram story post captioned “check out that month old pedi” posted in the article, which the author comments on, saying “Yep, relatable” (Diaz, 2020). However, this relatability is contrasted against an obviously aspirational message, regarding the exorbitant cost of her bath routine, and multiple expensive products used to achieve these results.

In addition to the idea that one can practice self-care by consuming goods, there is the implication that this consumption can enact change on the consumer. In an article about seasonal self-care a \$189 body pillow is said to “literally ha[ve] out necks, backs and bodies supported during the sleepy season ahead” (Buxton, 2020). Another article that ties discourses of witchcraft and self-care suggests in its copy that a facial spritz will “add to your karma points,” or that bath salts will “awaken your senses and help you set an intention for the day” (Fowlie, 2018). These

articles depict products as agents of change by using active language, while the consumer of the product needs only purchase and use these items to reap their benefits. There is the implication that these products will work upon you to impart you with rest and relaxation. It allows the reader to believe that they can take a passive role in the practice of self-care, they simply need to buy the meditation cushion and the change will come. This is appealing as often women lack the time and resources to engage actively in forms of care for themselves and instead can receive care through consumption. This discourse allows the reader to be vulnerable and to be taken care of by these products. It is also explicitly related to consumption and who has the power to consume, despite women often lacking temporal resources to engage in self-care, many women also lack the financial means to engage in this type of consumerism. Lazar (2011) links emancipation with a consumerist discourse and how Singaporean beauty ads promise the freedom to be beautiful, in this case, consumerism offers women the freedom to rest and relax.

Often neoliberal subjects are expected to manage and conduct themselves appropriately as good citizens and being a consumer is an integral part of that role (Outlette & Hay, 2008). A holiday gift guide focused on self-care in HelloGiggles, opens with “If this year has taught us nothing else, it’s that our health can’t be taken for granted. At the same time, anxiety over the pandemic and the election has highlighted the importance of prioritizing our emotional well-being, too” (Gilbert, 2020). Opening an article that exists solely to direct readers towards products to buy implicitly links the act of consumption to caring for our health and emotional well-being. This practice of consumption is also related to identity formation, as considered in the case study of Lululemon, individuals are often looking to shed their old identities, in favor of new and enhanced ones. With Lululemon there is the “implicit suggestion that’s that the consumption of athletic wear reflects an ethic of personal commitment” (p. 85) and that

purchasing the brand is not an indulgence, but rather a “thing of virtue,” (p. 85) because the products will be used in the construction of a newer and healthier you (Lavrence & Lozinski, 2014). The purchaser is constituted as a productive subject through consuming certain cultivated lifestyle goods, and you consume to become an aspirational version of yourself.

Self-care is often something that is framed as highly individualized which allows for a vast number of products to be presented as part of a potential self-care routine. Self-care can be integrated into many different existing discourses to sell goods, which is something that is seen through both publications. One article on finding self-care products that suit your zodiac sign opens with, “self-care looks different for everyone ... [and] If you don’t know where to start, and you happen to be an astrology lover, the stars can give you some guidance” (Magaldi & Rivas, 2021). There are also multiple seasonal self-care guides, suggesting that you should get a warm pair of slippers or a new weighted blanket, and one guide on making self-care “a little more magical” by “adding a spiritual element to your self-care [which] has never been easier, or more on-trend, thanks to the rise of witchcraft in wellness” (Fowlie, 2018). This broad categorization of self-care and the way that it is linked with other discourses such as astrology or witchcraft serves to keep our conception of self-care as a broad but still very feminized practice.



Figure 1: (Magaldi, 2021) (Gilbert, 2020)

There is also emphasis on the visual presentation of products throughout the articles. The products are often shown isolated in front of an abstract and colorful background (See Fig. 2). These graphics are not often ones that seem to require a high level of effort, rather focusing on simplicity and placing a collage of objects against a backdrop that complements them. The bright backgrounds contrast against the products makes them stand out more, but the colors of the background also emphasize the “active” properties of the products. It makes the products look more dynamic and interesting when they are placed together and atop a colorful background. This construction of these objects as active agents allows the reader to engage in a type of passivity, however, other facets of the discourses around self-care are often not as passive as those related to consumption.

The Self as a Project

Another theme throughout these articles is the way that the self is presented as a project that requires seemingly unending and unacknowledged labor. Often, this takes the form of a body project which Lupton (2013) describes as “practices of embodiment that serve to assist people in defining their identities” (p. 396). Through self-care, there is also the cultivation of

discipline through developing practices and self-tracking. All these aspects work together to inform a view of self-care as another part of a busy life, a task that must be completed, just another box to check off a never-ending to-do list. I will discuss some key examples of this theme in this section.

One specific aspect of self-care discourse that comes across as a distinct project is that of developing mindfulness. Mindfulness is quite central to Refinery29 and HelloGiggles discourses around self-care, especially when needing content that is not specifically advertising products, however, there is still an affiliate link for a meditation cushion in one article suggesting self-care gifts for the holidays (Gilbert, 2020). Mindfulness is tied to practices of meditation which are mentioned only in purely secular forms. There is no discussion of meditation in terms of any cultural or religious connotations throughout the articles I surveyed for this project. Mindfulness is stripped of its spirituality and often exclusively focuses on the results it can bring to the reader. Often discussions of mindfulness are brought up as being results-oriented – they focus on the outcome of mindfulness, how you will feel calmer, focused, and less prone to emotional outbursts. This aligns with Gill & Orgard’s (2021) idea of the positivity imperative, which focuses on cultivating discourses of hope, gratitude, and resilience, there is the promise that through the practices of mindfulness and meditation that the reader will be able to embody these qualities.

Meditation is often presented as a tool to cultivate discipline. One article states, “mediation can help control stress, better regulate our emotions and improve focus” (Gilbert, 2020). The focus of this statement are the verbs, “control,” “regulate,” and “improve” which serve to emphasize the disciplinary aspects of cultivating a meditation practice. It focuses on the outcomes of the practice, rather than the process of meditation or any spiritual connection to the

practice. Another article states that mindfulness is “just like going to the gym and building muscle, developing mindfulness takes skill and practice to reap the full benefits” (Ishler, 2021). This analogy emphasizes the positive outcomes of meditation practice, but how constant work and effort must be applied to fully realize those benefits.

In addition to being framed as labor, the project of self-care is also often presented as an individual responsibility for individual gain. Dunn (2020) urges readers that “focusing on the things that fill you up in meaningful ways leaves you feeling more centered, grounded, and cared for on an individual level.” In the “Self-Care Sunday” series published in HelloGiggles, which asks the interviewees about their approaches to self-care, when asked about the community aspect of self-care the respondents focus on “muting others” (Ishak, 2020a) and “opting out” (Ishak, 2020b) rather than ways they are engaging with their communities. While establishing healthy boundaries is important, in these articles these boundaries are addressed specifically when discussing community, rather than in another section of the article, which stresses that these interviewees see self-care as an individual practice, rather than a community one.

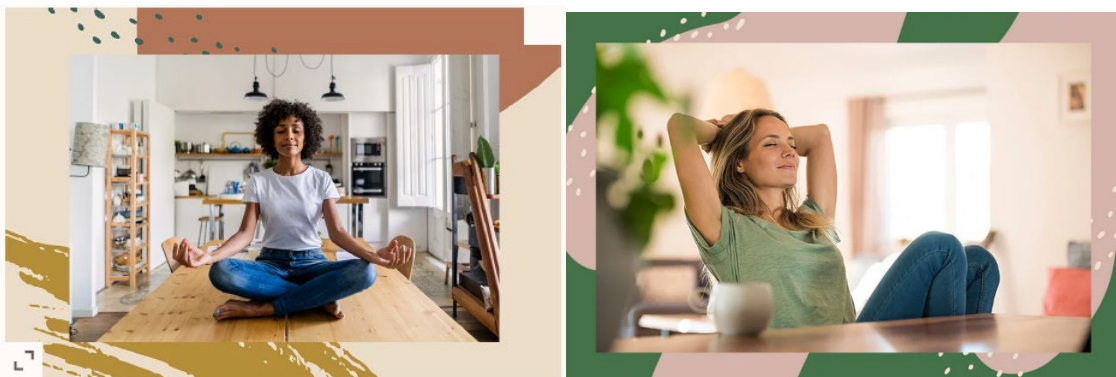


Figure 2: Images from Norris, 2020 and Dunn, 2020

One way to examine the ways in which the project of self-care is constructed is by examining the images present in these articles. A common trope of the images presented in self-care articles is a woman by herself with her eyes closed, smiling (see Fig. 1). In contrast to the bright and bold images that products are displayed against, the women shown in these images are shown in a neutrally colored room and wear simple clothing. Often the images are superimposed over a minimalist background image of amorphous shapes, likely this frame is to provide some contrast against the stark white of the webpage to make the image stand out. These images show how self-care should make us feel, we should be blissed out and soothed. Which emphasizes self-care as a result-oriented process. These images seem to strive for inclusivity, representing women of all races, as well as women of various sizes, which is quite positive. However, when considering the backdrop of these images there is often an indication of class. The women exist in neutral-colored, brightly lit rooms, the minimalist background is free of clutter or any indication of life outside of the present moment. The lack of clutter or life combined with the clean brightly lit room is indicative of a middle-class existence, there is no obvious luxury in these images, but there is also a lack of any indicators of poverty or the working class.

Another regimented aspect of self-care involves the way in which one is meant to think, which often comes up in the form of manifesting. Manifestation is a current popular psychology concept wherein one focuses their thoughts on their desired outcome to help them bring about a personal goal. In a Self-Care Sunday interview a HelloGiggles staff member discusses “manifesting [her] life goals” (as qtd in Ishak, 2020a) as one of her self-care practices. Another article discusses writing new intentions each month and “keep[ing] the intentions in mind with everything that [they] do, as it helps [them] focus on investing [their] energy in the right places” (Ishler, 2021). The focus of this statement on manifesting as investing has a reminder of the

market principles inherent in neoliberalism. The analogy of investing is one that supports neoliberalism's version of the entrepreneurial subject. Incorporating the popular concept of manifestation into self-care is not exactly a shocking departure from regular practices of self-care, but it is illustrative of the psychic life of neoliberalism as explored by Scharff (2016), in which women act as entrepreneurs of life and are continually striving to self-optimize. Manifestation is an excellent example of this optimization, as it has a very low barrier to entry and is essentially trying to think one's way to a better version of the self.

Another aspect of self-optimization that pops up in these articles is the practice of tracking which is highlighted in several of the articles as a crucial part of the project of self-care. For example, one article attempts to sell the Amazon Halo Tracker, which “analyzes the tone of your voice on how energized – or depressed – you sound to others” as well as tracking the “quality and quantity of sleep” (Gilbert, 2020). This article ties self-care practices to larger practices of tracking and quantifying aspects of life and wellness. Lupton (2013) considers that these devices “tend to place emphasis on the potential for the ‘empowerment of lay people offered by these technologies and the importance of ‘taking responsibility’ for one's health” (pg. 397). The inclusion of the product in this list implies that the way in which you sound to others should be part of your self-care. Insisting that part of caring for the self is ensuring that you are presenting a certain version of yourself to others, ideally one who is not tired or depressed, but happy and energetic and willing to bring that energy into other realms of life. There is also the idea of self-care as something to be planned and regimented. One author suggests developing a “self-care plan.” (Dunn, 2020) this illustrates the view that joy must be quantified and measured. Perhaps doing something like this adds a certain amount of justification to self-care practices. This implies that caring for oneself for enjoyment or connection with the self is certainly not

enough on its own. It should be scheduled into the day, subject to planning and quantification, for it to be worth our time. However, despite the way that these articles frame self-care as being a significant and important part of one's life, there is also an aspect of critique to many of these articles as well.

Critique of Self-Care

There is a critical aspect to many of the articles, and many of them critique the aspects of self-care that are class-based, non-specific, or rooted in whiteness. Many of the articles about self-care include some form of critique of certain self-care practices, often the critiques are of ways that self-care is presented in other articles. These critiques can show up in articles that are about other topics, but there are also examples of entire articles that critique aspects of self-care and the ways that it is used without much consideration of class or racial backgrounds.

Self-care is at times critiqued even for its amorphous nature and the lack of clarity around what exactly it consists of. For example, in one article stating that homecare is a form of self-care, it is identified as “one of those millennial marketing buzzwords that’s so ubiquitous, it’s almost ceased to hold meaning” (Munro, 2020). However, these publications are also playing into what they state that self-care is “not.” Often what self-care is “not” are things like: “dieting and exercising” (Flynn, 2021) or “treat[ing] yourself and spending copious amounts of money to feel marginally better” (Newman-Bremang, 2021). Despite saying that these things are what self-care is not, often these things are present in other articles published in these outlets. Like most media publications HelloGiggles and Refinery29 *are* dependent on advertising dollars for revenue and the advertising or affiliate links in these articles contribute to the bottom line of these publications. This ties into the concept of audience commodity from Dallas Smythe (1981)

and his assertion that there is no free lunch, because that lunch is always subordinate to the content of the advertisements. And in the case of self-care articles often this money is being made by willing the reader to “treat themselves” and indeed “spend copious amounts of money to feel marginally better” (Newman-Bremang, 2021).

An idea that goes hand-in-hand with the discourse of critique surrounding self-care is that it is also set up as something that is frivolous. An example of this is an interview with Stella Bugbee who is the editor-in-chief of *The Cut*, in which she states, “who the fuck has time for self-care?” (as qtd in Ravitz, 2019). This position is very indicative of her race and privilege – she sees self-care as something frivolous, while for others self-care can be essential for survival, or done in preparation for or in recovery from emotionally taxing or political labor. Often, the self-care being taken to task is one that seems to prioritize discourses of consumption, or one that seems particularly privileged for lack of a better word. While there certainly are articles that seek to democratize the practices of self-care, yet they are propped up against articles discussing Hilary Duff’s \$400 bath routine, or interviews with Billy Porter about his partnership with Clorox – in which he acknowledges he does not do much of his own cleaning. This is a good example of the downstream effects of this gendered labor as necessary to sustain the self-care of others, in which women with ample financial resources will visit nail salons, hire childcare and cleaning staff, and get massages. Often the people who complete these labors are marginalized working-class women, which is not something acknowledged in any of the articles that I surveyed.

At times, self-care practices are even satirized. One prime example of this is an article titled “Self-Care for the End Times” in which the article provides a detailed description of a daily routine where self-care practices are satirized heavily, beginning by suggesting that self-care is

“the idea that it is up to the individual to live in wellness, prioritizing health, happiness, and being conventionally attractive” (Ratchford, 2020). This opening squarely reminds the reader that self-care is often presented as an individual undertaking, that requires effort from the reader in many different realms of life. An interesting aspect of this article is that it also includes practices that are included earnestly in other articles on the site. Such as suggesting that in order to meditate you should, “buy the fanciest meditation cushion you can find to signal to your brain that you are worth it” (Ratchford, 2020). Despite meditation cushions being listed in multiple other self-care articles as just that, an incentive to meditate. This contradiction in content is one of the most jarring things that came up in this analysis and is illustrative of both the open critique of self-care practices, and the contradictions that exist between articles in these publications.

At times, the authors will openly critique aspects of self-care and its accessibility and purpose. One article that does such suggests ways that one can practice self-care without spending money (Dunn, 2020). This article does not provide an explicit critique but rather provides alternatives to self-care that are not rooted in the practice of consumption. Another example, Santilli (2020) posits that a problem with what she calls the “women’s self-care industry” is that it excludes minority women because they often do not have the economic means to participate in certain practices of wellness and self-care. Specifically, she critiques how “the self-care industry thrives on products far beyond the hygiene necessities, and pretty much ignores those who aren’t in a position of privilege to purchase these products” (Santilli, 2020). However, this critique misses the mark a bit in stating that “there are very few companies making strides in the self-care space for low-income women,” (Santilli, 2020) as though this is the primary issue. Framing companies as the solution to the problems of low-income women is a Band-Aid solution at best, but at its worst is a testament to how pervasive the logic of capitalism

has become in our lives. Rather than suggest ways in which women can band together in order to lobby for their rights and increase their economic standing, Santilli concerns herself with empowerment conferences and the role of corporations in the emancipation of women.

However, there are articles that do address the economic and class dimensions of how self-care is presented at times. An article that exemplifies critique of the racial and class elements of self-care is Newman-Bremang's (2020) article on reclaiming radical black self-care. She discusses the roots of self-care in radical black activism, viewing self-care as something that has been “insidiously co-opted by white people and stripped of its BLACK radical meaning” (Newman-Bremang, 2020). This article critiques many aspects of the phenomenon of self-care, she states: “Self-care cannot be an 'act of political warfare' of the only battle you're waging is against your frown lines with \$110 moisturizer” (Newman-Bremang, 2020). This is a very explicit critique of the class-based aspects of one discourse of self-care, in doing so she also calls attention to the roots of the political aspects of caring for oneself, how it can be done in service of achieving a political outcome rooted in the search for justice. However, while these issues are discussed in these publications there is still content that is shilling exactly what these articles rally against. This contradiction of discourses within the same websites goes to show how the term self-care is still very much contested ground, one that has radical possibilities, but is also ripe for the co-option of consumerist and neoliberal rhetoric to enforce certain ways of being and to sell luxury goods.

Conclusion

This analysis shows that there are many different threads woven in the discourses of self-care between Refinery29 and HelloGiggles. Some of the major themes are consumption as a

form of self-care, the self as a project, and the critique of self-care. Together these themes provide a partial glimpse into how self-care is still very much contested ground in its meaning and how it continues to enforce discourses of self-surveillance, regulation, and at times co-opts the term “self-care” in the construction of the good neoliberal citizen, who relies on the ability to self-soothe through products and practices of discipline rather than considering what they are disciplining and soothing. These issues continue to have a profound effect on the lives of women living in our current late capitalist society, and the issues of who is called to talk about self-care, and who is excluded from the conversations around self-care speak to larger concerns within our culture about work, womanhood, and the self.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I sought to understand the ways that self-care is discursively constructed through these online publications, and ultimately noted that there lacks a homogenous construction of the project of self-care, but that there are common threads running through many of the articles surveyed. Throughout this analysis I found three primary themes, self-care as consumption, the project of self-care, and the critique of self-care. These themes exemplify the ways in which self-care discourses are numerous and at times contradictory. To conclude this thesis, I will summarize my findings and articulate areas for further study that have come up through this project.

Self-care is first constructed to sell products to readers. Self-care as consumption addresses the discourses of consumption that are often found in women's media. These articles tend to suggest that if the right products can be purchased then it will result in the practice of self-care. These articles tend to promote self-care as more of a passive practice, enabling the goods purchased to act upon the reader, rather than engaging in meaningful activities and practices. Instead, the products are constructed as active agents that will impart the reader with rest and relaxation.

The project of self-care shows the underlying neoliberal ideology that the self is a project that requires unending work to comply with the demands of a late-capitalist society that insists its subjects be constantly striving for improvement and refinement of the self. Often these self-improvement imperatives involve trying to constrain aspects of the body or mind through exercise, meditation, or engaging in manifestation practices. Self-tracking is also a component of these discourses and there is the expectation that not only will the reader engage in practices of

self-improvement and optimization, but also measure and regulate these practices through self-tracking.

The critique of self-care attempts to scratch the itch of providing content that is accessible to those who may not be able to afford to purchase products in the name of self-care, or for those who are weary about the consumer-driven orientations of self-care. Many of the critiques of self-care address concerns that many practices of self-care are class-based, non-specific, or rooted in whiteness. However, even those in positions of privilege will at times lobby critiques of self-care in viewing a person considering and prioritizing self-care as something that is frivolous and detracts from the other important labor that could be being completed during time wasted in attempting to care for oneself.

Self-care is a term that has embodied many things and still sees shifts in meaning, as seen in both the review of existing literature and in my analysis. Often, there is equally as much attention put into defining what self-care is as there are suggestions of things that one can do as self-care. Although it seems straightforward, the concept of self-care continues to be difficult to pin down with certainty, which makes it the subject of many competing discourses. This can be seen by reading even a few of these articles, each claim that self-care is something different, often invalidating other articles' definitions within the same publication. These definitions are broad and general, and yet there are often contradictions within these explanations of what self-care is and which activities can constitute self-care. The definitions of self-care provided usually served the content of the article, for example, when discussing home care, self-care was “about interspersing your day-to-day life with sometimes-small but always meaningful actions, ritualism, or items that help you feel balanced and healthy” (Munro, 2020). Or in the context of celebrities doing interviews for promotional material, self-care was often more ordinary daily

acts, such as being present with children (Weaver, 2021), taking baths with Epsom salt (Simeon, 2021), or something as broad as the concept of “taking care of mental health” (Flynn, 2021).

My research suggests that women are still being disciplined towards consuming products, and pursuing self-improvement, but also shows that women are questioning these practices of consumption and self-optimization. The inclusion of dissenting voices is encouraging, even if they are currently outnumbered by exhortations to consume. While the broad definitions and contradictions in discourses of self-care serve to keep the term open and vague, able to embody many things so that it can be used as both a vehicle for sales as well as a tool of critique. This vague and non-specific notion of self-care allows it to continually be imbued with meanings that enforce current cultural hegemonies and inequalities and then used again to dispute the meanings that it is given for commercial purposes, but at times also gives them a platform to dissent and consider their practices from a more critical standpoint.

Due to the scope of an undergraduate honors thesis, there are so many other areas I was not able to explore for this paper that would be excellent starting points for future scholarly projects. This is one of the benefits of critical discourse analysis, it is a very generative approach that can show many other potential areas of study and draw out new research questions (Janks, 1997). For example, research on how self-care is discursively produced and negotiated on social media platforms or by influencers could be a rich area of study that would show the way that these types of product suggestions and pieces of advice are taken up and interpreted by those who engage with self-care content online.

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