Looking on the bright side: Positivity discourse, affective practices and new femininities

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Abstract:	<p>From policy to personal practice, injunctions to embrace happiness and to harness the positive effects of positive affects are pulsing through global emotion regimes. Scholarship tracing this phenomenon at a broader scale links this push for positivity—along with other seemingly ‘entrepreneurial’ affects—to postfeminist and neoliberal cultural formations. Within and beyond psychology, feminist analyses are highlighting the gendered address of these formations and their imbrication with contemporary femininities. While this raises important questions about the implications of positivity imperatives for women and girls, an absence of fine-grained empirical work in this area means little is known regarding how positivity discourse is taken up and lived out. We draw from interviews with 24 women facing distinctive emotional management demands (Instagram influencers, mothers and service workers) to investigate whether and how broader pushes for positivity inflect everyday living. Our analysis presents two affective–discursive repertoires that participants drew on to explain positivity. These repertoires offer a seductive suite of affective–discursive practices that blend the ‘feeling rules’ of traditional femininity with an entrepreneurialism characteristic of perfected contemporary femininity. In offering new and appealing ways of being a woman, positivity discourse may also sustain profoundly unequal patterns of emotional practice and regulation.</p>

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Article

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Abstract

From policy to personal practice, injunctions to embrace happiness and to harness the positive effects of positive affects are pulsing through global emotion regimes. Scholarship tracing this phenomenon links the push for positivity—along with other seemingly ‘entrepreneurial’ affects—to neoliberal cultural formations. Within and beyond psychology, feminist analyses are highlighting the gendered address of these formations and their imbrication with contemporary femininities. While this raises important questions about the implications of positivity imperatives for women and girls, an absence of fine-grained empirical work means little is known regarding how positivity discourse is taken up and lived out. We draw from interviews with 24 women facing distinctive emotional management demands (Instagram influencers, mothers and service workers) to investigate how broader pushes for positivity inflect everyday living. Our analysis presents two *affective–discursive repertoires* that participants drew on to explain positivity. These repertoires offer a seductive suite of affective–discursive practices that blend the ‘feeling rules’ of traditional femininity with a more contemporary entrepreneurialism. While offering new and appealing ways of being a woman, positivity discourse may also reaffirm profoundly unequal patterns of emotional practice and regulation.

Key Words

Affective practice, positivity, femininity, discourse, happiness, Aotearoa New Zealand

Exhortations to accentuate the positive are everywhere one looks. From cereal packaging to social services, daily life is full of enjoinders to harness the ‘power of positive thinking’ (Peale, 1953). Positivity discourse of this kind has a lengthy history in the West (Binkley, 2014; Ehrenreich, 2010). While the prioritisation—and moralisation—of the pursuit of happiness are not in themselves new, the 21st century marks a distinct moment in the history of happiness as the push for positivity spills into policy and everyday practice with new reach and intensity. The discipline of psychology is an important player in this phenomenon.

Under the questionable auspices of positive psychology and ‘happiness science’ (Frawley, 2015), positivity discourse is achieving unprecedented visibility in the form of new indices and indicators that gauge whether all is well in our personal, organisational and (inter)national affairs (Gallup, 2016; Global Positive Forum, 2018). At a finer level, ‘how-to’ guides to cognitive reframing (Tirch, 2018) and power-posing (May, 2012) flood social networks, reworking older discourses of positivity in order to act on and improve the lives of younger generations.

Scholars are interested in the gendered address of contemporary positivity discourse for good reason. Femininity has long been associated with emotionality and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), and the policing of women’s positive emotional displays is mundane and unremarkable in many Westernised contexts. Indeed, women and girls may be called on to display and perfect pleasing emotional dispositions with particular frequency and intensity (Blackman, 2004; Riley et al., 2019). Upbeat emotional management is cast as the solution to a kaleidoscope of feminised troubles, from anxiety and low self-esteem, to sexuality and body-image, to mothering and work–life balance (Dobson, 2014; Gill & Elias, 2014; Gill & Orgad, 2017; Rottenberg, 2014; Staneva & Wigginton, 2018).

For these reasons, feminist scholarship spanning psychology, sociology and media studies is increasingly locating positivity imperatives within a larger landscape of new femininities and

the ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1979) that scaffold them (see, for example, Dobson, 2015; Gill & Kanai, 2018; McRobbie, 2007). An established thread of research in this area explores how prized affective states linked to neoliberalism and individualisation, such as confidence and resilience, circulate and gain cultural purchase as markers of today’s ideal femininities. Researchers in this field—often working with the tools of critical feminist psychology — have documented how upbeat emotional management is increasingly presented as the pathway to success and prosperity in Western professional and intimate life (Gill & Elias, 2014; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Scharff, 2016). At the same time, new practices of femininity that centre on positive thinking, confidence and ‘grit’ may sustain women and girls’ attachment to ‘the perfect’ (McRobbie, 2015, p. 9) and promote the silencing of complaint, the cloaking of vulnerability and the personalisation and internalisation of socio-political harms (Baker, 2010; Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2016).

Even as scholars who question the ‘promise of happiness’ (Ahmed, 2010b) begin to interrogate positivity discourse and the potentially depoliticising effects of its circulation, there is a striking absence of detailed empirical work documenting and analysing how positivity imperatives operate and interpellate in everyday contexts. Consequently, questions regarding the *imprint* of positivity imperatives, that is, their modified, mediated and reformulated interplay with individual affective rhythms and atmospheres, remain unaddressed. Such questions are also at the heart of critical feminist psychology: how does discourse settle into women’s emotion lives? How do new affective formations find a foothold—or not—in longer standing gendered emotion regimes? How do such processes unfold, and what are their implications?

In this article we begin this work, asking how positivity touches down in the everyday lives of women living in Aotearoa. Our analysis draws on recent theoretical developments in the social study of affect and emotion. With affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) as an organising

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principle, we follow Wetherell and colleagues’ (2015) lead in bending a foundational tool of critical psychology—the interpretative repertoire—to a new purpose: illuminating two *affective–discursive repertoires* of positivity. In this paper, we tease out these two repertoires and explore the key characters animating them. We also show how, when taken together, these repertoires produce a potent combination of affective–discursive practices (Wetherell, 2012) that pull together elements of traditional and more contemporary idealised feminine figures. We conclude with some reflections on the implications of these practices and the attachments they forge and sustain.

The research

Place, data and methods

The data we draw on come from 24 individual interviews conducted in early 2019 in Aotearoa New Zealand (ethics approval XXX). Aotearoa is, we contend, a rich site for investigating positivity and the ‘psychic life’ (Scharff, 2016) of neoliberalism. Strongly networked into anglophone emotion regimes where positivity is gaining considerable traction, Aotearoa has been an international leader in neoliberal economic policy reform (Kelsey, 1997) and is once again making headlines, as ‘relentless positivity’ enters policy-making and political discourse (One News, 2017).

Interviews were designed to tap into participants’ meaning-making concerning positivity imperatives, and to explore participants’ social media practice through digital ‘go-alongs’ (Jørgensen, 2016), where participants walk-and-talked us through their Instagram posts, feeds and posting practices. We chose Instagram because it privileges user photography as a mode of communication and self-presentation and is a preferred venue for posting and sharing

positive experiences (Waterloo et al., 2017). Although not drawn on directly, an understanding of participants' Instagram posting practices informs our analysis.

We hoped to speak to women aged between 18 and 35 from three role-based groups whose regular activities demand considerable emotional labour: service workers (including hospitality and healthcare workers), mothers of young children, and aspiring or established social media influencers. While women in these groups may face heightened expectations of positive emotional management, we speculated that the nature of these expectations could be quite different. Influencers' emotional work requires a balance of self-branding and authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012); mothers are called on to embody the joys of motherhood while confronting profound changes to personal and working identities (Staneva & Wigginton, 2018); service workers must meet customers' demands with equanimity (Hochschild, 1983)—and may also be faced with low-paying and/or precarious employment.

Recruitment was conducted through posting advertisements in community spaces, networks, groups and organisations relevant to the three participant groups we were seeking, and by circulating advertisements through interviewers' networks. In the case of influencers, potential participants were identified via public Instagram accounts and/or media reporting and were contacted directly with an invitation to join the research. All those who expressed an interest in participating were provided with more information, after which interviews were arranged.

Interviews were conducted by the first author (a Pākehā heterosexual ciswoman in her 30s), alongside two research assistants experienced in qualitative research (XX, a heterosexual ciswoman of Māori and Pākehā ethnic heritage in her 30s; XX, a Pākehā gay cisman in his 20s). Each interviewer conducted eight interviews. To ensure spread and consistency across

the sample, each interviewer worked across two participant cohorts. Interviewers were in regular contact to discuss early impressions as we developed our approach.

Interviewees chose convenient interview locations, frequently a cafe or at interviewees' homes. Conversations typically lasted between 1 and 2 hours, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A semi-structured approach enabled interviewers to work from an agreed set of questions and prompts, while also allowing for exploration and flexibility. All interviews canvassed participants' ideas about and experiences with emotional management, stress and pressure, positivity (definitions and practices) and Instagram (usage and posting practices).

Participants

We interviewed 24 participants who self-identified as women aged 18 to 35, divided evenly between the three cohorts. Participants were invited to answer demographic questions, if they chose. Participants reported ethnicities as one (or more) of the following: Pākehā/NZ European/Caucasian (9), Chinese/Chinese Kiwi (3), Indian (2), British/English (2), European/German (2), Kiwi Eurasian (1), Māori (1), Samoan (1), South African (1), Tongan (1), US (1). One participant described themselves as a New Zealander, one as Caucasian, and one participant did not respond. A total of 14 interviewees were aged between 18 and 29; a further 10 were aged between 20 and 35 (average 28 years). Almost all were currently living in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland); two influencers were based elsewhere in Aotearoa. Some participants indicated that they were affected by impairments or disabilities, including anxiety (4), learning disabilities (1), depression (1) and PTSD (1). Others indicated none (13) or left the form blank (6). Of the eight aspiring/established influencers interviewed, follower numbers ranged from 1,500 to approximately 300,000 (average 43,500).

Analytic approach

In this article, our interest lies in how participants define, discuss and enact positivity. We work from a social constructionist perspective, where discourse is understood as a social practice with tangible effects and analysis typically focuses on language use, exploring its performative and/or ideological functions. More specifically, our analysis draws on Wetherell's concept of affective practice (Wetherell, 2012, 2013, 2015; see also authors, dates). Affective practice is a compelling organising concept for emotion research because of its potential to connect the general (discourses and cultural logics of emotion) with the particular (personal embodied experiences and affective routines).

Following Wetherell and colleagues (2015), our analysis lightly reworks a foundational tool of critical psychology—the interpretative repertoire—to suit our interest in affective–discursive practice. Interpretative repertoires will be familiar to many *Feminism & Psychology* readers. Repertoires cobble together a collection of ideas, arguments, characters and figures of speech that are routinely mobilised together, offering a distinctive characterisation of the group, argument or phenomenon being discussed. Repertoires also have a synecdochal quality, such that referencing one element of a repertoire (feminists have hairy legs) is enough to bring to mind the richer array of ideas it contains (feminists are vindictive, lesbian, seeking to eliminate men; for more on this, see Edley & Wetherell, 2001). While repertoires are commonly analysed in terms of their ideological effects, they can be usefully rearticulated as *affective–discursive repertoires* in cases where affect and emotion are under direct investigation and are the topic of the conversation. As we hope to demonstrate, analyses of affective–discursive repertoires help to connect the dots between

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individual affective practice and the prevailing ‘feeling rules’ within which they take shape (Hochschild, 1979).

Analysis began with systematic coding of interview transcripts according to a range of broad categories of talk, including ‘defining positivity’ and ‘positivity practices’. This corpus of broadly relevant talk was read and re-read for patterns in language use. After testing and refining patterns (with some false starts), we identified two dominant repertoires of positivity patterning participants’ talk. The first repertoire constructs positivity as a potent embodied energy with attractive interpersonal effects. The second repertoire constructs positivity as an entrepreneurial cognitive practice that boosts productivity and unlocks inner potential. We extended our investigation of these repertoires to explore the central characters animating them, and the leading affect practices they make available.

To safeguard interview participants’ confidentiality, we have used pseudonyms (selected either by participants or interviewers) in place of participants’ real names, along with a cohort identifier (mother, service worker, influencer). We have decided not to attach further contextual information to pseudonyms, such as an interviewees’ ethnicity and/or employment details, as the risk to confidentiality outweighs the interpretative benefits of this additional information. We do, however, provide carefully framed biographic details in specific cases where this is analytically necessary. Missing passages of speech are marked by [...]. Insertions of text for comprehension are signalled [thus]. Commas indicate a pause in a flow of speech, and full stops denote a longer pause (and, usually, a transition in thought or tone).

Analysis

We begin our analysis with participants’ general orientation to postivity discourse. Interviewees’ initial, definitional talk about positivity cast it as a simple, rather obvious good.

Positivity was ‘the opposite of negativity’ (Callie, service worker): an optimistic and happy state of mind and a glass-half-full, ‘look on the bright side’ (Megan, service worker) orientation to present and future circumstances. Positivity might take shape as grateful, rosy appraisals of one’s situation (‘thinking the best of things’; Megan, service worker) as well as extending these ‘hopeful’ (Sam, influencer) ‘happy vibes’ (Jessie, service worker) from the present into an imagined future. As Tania (mother) mused, positivity meant feeling ‘optimistic... that things will be okay’. Positivity—and, more specifically, the state of *being positive*—was frequently linked to living a good and happy life. For Ash (mother), positivity meant ‘just being happy in a nutshell’. Indeed, as Megan remarked, without positivity, ‘what’s the point?’:

I definitely try to be positive. Yeah, otherwise like what's the point you know? You're just going to have an unhappy life and what's the point of that? (Megan, service worker)

Indeed, positivity was almost always considered a desirable state and a valued personal quality. When asked, some interviewees agreed that it was possible to be ‘too positive’, although tangible examples of this were few, and were generally limited to forms of positivity that were not ‘rooted in reality’ (Julia, influencer), and which resulted in harm to others. This included ‘setting people up to fail’ through false hopes and promises:

you have to be positive with your mind-set otherwise it could end up being quite a hard job, but you can’t, it’s just creating, people its setting people up to fail I think if you’re too positive in your job (Stacey, service worker)

This passage is typical in that the possibility of being too positive refines the definition of good positivity, rather than undermining it: despite the risks, you still ‘have to be positive’.

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Although the simple affirmation of positivity was a regular point of departure, the term’s complexity became apparent as interviews progressed. Far from neat and homogenous, participants’ positivity discourse proved to be capacious, with highly flexible and sometimes contradictory functions. In the space of a single conversation, positivity could take shape as an ethic, a mission or a choice; a natural disposition or a practice to be cultivated; a therapeutic activity or a practical, actuarial undertaking. Interviewees’ positivity talk was patterned by two leading accounts of *doing positivity*, which we analyse below as affective–discursive repertoires. The first repertoire constructs positivity as an embodied, relational energy; the second marks positivity out as a deliberate cognitive practice. Below, we explore these prevailing repertoires and associated affective practices in detail.

Positivity as attractive relationality

The first repertoire of positivity in interviewees’ talk foregrounds the relational dimensions of positivity. At the core of this repertoire is the construction of positivity as energy. More specifically, positivity is understood as a highly desirable and *attractive interpersonal energy* that passes from person to person in the form of ‘happy vibes’ (Jessie, service worker). Figures of speech associated with physics, particularly electromagnetism, were frequently employed to illustrate a key feature of this affective–discursive repertoire: the pulling power of positivity. Positivity is ‘like a magnet’ (Kate, influencer): positive people exude a positive interpersonal energy that ‘rubs off’ (Rosie, service worker) on others. Julia describes how those with a positive valence draw other people in:

when you’re positive, I think that people are more likely to be drawn to you or you’re more likely to attract positive people [...] it gives you energy (Julia, influencer)

This repertoire articulates positivity's attractive qualities. Positivity is a pleasing affective disposition that pulls others in magnetically. This is in marked contrast to the rather repellent qualities of 'heavy and dark' negativity (Gemma, service worker), which syphons away positivity and repels positive people. Negativity has its own magnetic qualities, however: negative energy begets further negativity and attracts negative people in a compounding, 'vicious' cycle:

if you're negative you're sucking your own energy away and then you're also attracting other negative people and it's just a vicious cycle of negativity. (Julia, influencer)

This repertoire's reliance on a vocabulary of electromagnetism spotlights a second core element of positivity: that positivity is a *relational practice* with a potentially far-reaching and beneficial interpersonal 'ripple effect' (Anna, influencer). Positivity may emanate from individual bodies, but positive energy inevitably spills outwards and is something that will 'feed... into other people' (Natalie, mother). Consequently, being positive and exuding positive energy is a social good, a way to have a valuable 'positive impact' (Jamie, influencer) on others. As Jamie explained, 'putting positive energy out there' as a way of 'doing good by people' could have compounding collective and personal dividends:

I've found in my life like everything goes well for me and I genuinely think that it's because I'm putting positive energy out there and doing good by people and then it's coming back to me you know. (Jamie, influencer)

Third, this repertoire constructs positivity as an *embodied* energy. The embodied quality of positive energy is apparent in interviewees' frequent references to body language, embodied states and sensations. Anna (influencer) described positivity as 'a warmth' which could be expressed through physical presence alone: 'you don't even need to say anything but just,

being there'. Others referred to communicating positivity through attention to body language. Kate described herself as 'very aware' of how her stance and facial expressions communicated her positive energy to others:

I'm very aware of my body language. So, that's something I'm always quite open and I always stand up tall. [...] And I smile a lot. So, when I meet people I'm always smiling and try and keep, I'm a big believer in good energy (Kate, influencer)

Indeed, smiles hold a particularly prominent role in this repertoire, as a marker of one's own positive energy and as a vector through which one could pass 'good energy' on to others. Although body language was especially emphasised, offering pleasant and complimentary remarks verbally and using upbeat language (like the word 'amazing'; Kate) could also be a means of spreading positive energy:

A lot of people have other issues going on in their lives so, [...] anyone really that I come across you know I'll be like "oh I really like your shirt" or I will be like "your earrings are really nice" or just trying to, say something positive (Megan, service worker)

So far, we have explored this repertoire of positivity as an attractive relational practice, outlining its three core features—emphasising energy, relationality and embodiment—and the accompanying tropes and figures of speech. Alongside these features, our analysis explores how these repertoires are *personified*; that is, how interviewees' talk about positivity evokes particular affective–discursive representations of positive and negative people. The leading figures or characters who animate this repertoire made an early appearance in the extracts presented above. Below, we turn our attention to them more fully and introduce an affective practice central to this repertoire: keeping emotions in check.

Keeping emotions in check: the positive person versus the negative drag

The ideal ‘positive person’ takes shape within this repertoire as someone whose enactment of positivity has an uplifting effect on others. Whether through warm body language or affirming words, the positive person shares their positive energy with others, wielding the power to ‘make other people’s lives so much better’ (Jamie, influencer). The capacity to both create and attract positive people is a central hallmark of this figure. Just as positive energy is defined against negative energy, so too the relationally oriented positive person within this repertoire finds its foil in the ‘drag’, a figure whose negative energy and actions bring others down. By letting negativity run rampant, this figure risks damaging herself and others, and needs to be reined in:

if you're like bowling down the street and you're feeling like being a cunt and you know whatever and like someone comes in front of you and then you're like "fuck you!" and you know it's like that's probably going to make their day shitty you feel shitty and so on (Jamie, influencer)

While this repertoires’ reliance on electromagnetic metaphor frames positivity as an inscrutable, elemental force, the relational functions of the positive and the negative person point us in another direction: towards the social and, more particularly, towards the gendered distribution of emotional labour. What is articulated as the power of personal positivity functions in practice as a relational duty. Traces of this work are evident in Kate’s (influencer) assertion that ‘you need to keep your own emotions in check if you want to work with someone and you know have a really good, positive interaction’. Indeed, this passage captures the affective–discursive practice at the heart of this iteration of the ‘positive person’: *keeping your emotions in check*. Emotional restraint and monitoring for others’ benefit has a long association with womanhood in the west, particularly in family life (Staneva &

Wigginton, 2018) but also in the workplace (Hochschild, 1983). Indeed, in Sara Ahmed's terms, normative western femininity is associated with a state of 'conditional happiness' (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 578), wherein one's own happiness hinges, inequitably, on the happiness of others. The imbalance inherent in keeping oneself in check is exemplified in an interview with Natalie (mother), as she reflected on her adjustment to the challenges of motherhood:

It is really important that if you're happy and healthy and then you can feed that into other people and they can—husband, friends and that sort of thing. Like, if I am a wreck then it's not going to be good for [my baby], it's not going to be good for my husband and that sort of thing. So yeah, that was, that was, once I had [my baby] it was sort of like, get myself in check as quickly as possible sort of thing.

This affective practice is neatly crystallised in Natalie's account: it involves moving oneself from 'wreck' to 'in check' and doing so 'as quickly as possible'. And, once again, the relational value of a state of happiness and positivity is made clear. This repertoire of positivity works to raise the interpersonal stakes of emotional expression. It is highly resonant with discourses of maternal and wifely duty, and is able to capitalise on the familiarity of this structure of feeling without needing to reference it directly (this is convenient, as the notion of feminine duty may sound strikingly outdated to contemporary ears). Instead, the familiar and inequitable practice of keeping oneself in check is put forward in far more appealing packaging: through the attractiveness of positive energy and the beguiling possibility of having a 'positive impact' on others.

Positivity as agentic cognitive style

Alongside the repertoire outlined above, we identified a second dominant affective—discursive repertoire of positivity. This second repertoire is strikingly different from the first,

which as we have seen centres on relationality, embodiment and the interpersonal flow of emotional energy. In this repertoire, positivity is a more personal, interior affair: it is an agentic mindset, an empowering style of thought that is deliberately cultivated by individual thinkers.

Figures of speech and lay insights drawn from cognitive psychology scaffold this repertoire of positivity, particularly pop-scientific understandings of how ‘the brain’ operates. Here, positivity arises not from one’s own or others’ embodied energy, but from optimal thought patterns, achieved through mental focus and attention. Left to their own devices, brains are unreliable because they are ‘hardwired’ for negativity and ‘a greater sensitivity to unpleasant news’ (Marano, 2003 in *Psychology Today*). As a result, positivity is a matter of training the brain away from the negative and towards the positive:

for me especially every, 90% of my thoughts in my head are negative before I change them to positive [...] Even if there are 10,000 positive comments and one negative, you will remember that one negative and I think everyone’s brain does that [...] I definitely had to train my brain to be like—no, stop thinking like that. You have to think positively. (Lisa, service worker)

Working to ‘train the brain’ in this way implies a degree of separation between the knowledgeable speaker and the brain they are acting upon. Consider Nicky’s discussion of her use of affirmations:

Gradually by repeating something, you start to believe it and your brain starts to believe it and you start feeling a lot more powerful (Nicky, influencer)

By positioning the brain as an object to be worked on, this repertoire foregrounds the role of effort and agency in the practice of positivity. With willpower and patience, the maladaptive patterns that plague ‘everyone’s brain’ can be overwritten. Positivity is readily understood as

an *agentic practice*, an avenue for ‘regaining [...] control and having the power yourself to redirect the situation back on your terms’ (Kate, influencer). Within the terms of this repertoire, positivity lies within everyone’s reach. As Megan (service worker) observed, ‘it’s you’:

Your mind is you so if you want to change the way you look at something or if you want to be able to control your emotions and stuff then, just help yourself it’s you. It’s not a separate thing.

A final component of this affective–discursive repertoire is the connection it forges between positivity and self-optimisation. Helen (mother) valued ‘positive quotes’ because they ‘always inspire me to be a better person’. When articulating positivity through this repertoire, interviewees frequently emphasised positivity as a cognitive technique that would unlock potential and to ‘fuel’ a person to ‘achieve’:

I knew that if I worked on my mindset throughout it and I kept that really positive it would definitely fuel me to, to always achieve more and do more. And yeah, you are constantly working on different goals (Nicky, influencer)

Thus, positivity has strong appeal as a form of achievable self-investment that offers a productivity dividend, enabling action, progress and success. In this regard, the repertoire evokes a version of feminized agency that holds strong currency in the broader cultural field, including work exploring new subjectivities for women that favour ‘an entrepreneurial, individualistic mode’ (Gill, 2014, p. 509; McRobbie, 2007; Scharff, 2016), as well as self-help literature where psychobiology and empowered self-transformation are often drawn together (Riley et al., 2019). Aligning positivity, progress and productivity, this repertoire also depicts negativity as a form of stasis and waste. Simply put, negativity is ‘not

productive' (Julia, influencer): as Lea (mother) explained, focusing on the negative 'hasn't really gotten me anywhere'.

As it synthesises cognitive psychology techniques with entrepreneurial rhetoric, this repertoire puts forward its own dominant characters, who work to illustrate the importance of thinking positive—and the dangers of straying into the negative. We unpack these two figures and the leading affective practice that distinguishes them below.

The positive go-getter and the immobilised moaner

Aligned with this repertoire's emphasis on agentic cognitive optimisation, the ideal positive person takes shape as a go-getter who is willing to work on their mindset—and who reaps the rewards of doing so. Transcending emotional difficulties through hard work lends this figure a moral glow—a glow it shares with other entrepreneurial figures who populate the 'psychic life' of neoliberalism (Scharff, 2016). Another figure occupies the flipside of the positivity coin: the immobilised moaner. Where the go-getter acts, reflects, and works to 'choose a positive or better option' (Hayley, influencer), the moaner opts to sit—and even 'wallow' (Lea, mother)—in a negative mindset. These two figures traverse Jessie's (service worker) talk below:

I don't allow myself to be like like down like feeling like sad like I think it's important to, like I said before like focusing on the positive so you can manage how you feel. I feel like it's your mindset that like yeah, I don't know like yeah you can control how you feel about things and so it's important to be happy and think of the brighter side rather than let yourself like get down about stuff.

Defined by her decision to take control of her circumstances and her refusal to sink into negativity, the go-getter does not allow herself to 'get down about stuff'. . . And, by refocusing

on the ‘bright side’, she can manage her mindset and ‘be happy’. In contrast, the immobilised moaner indulges in negativity, making little effort to change or ‘reframe’. Importantly, the go-getter’s capacity for positive thinking is positioned within everyone’s reach. Interviewees’ talk about positivity emphasised the achievability of self-transformation away from ‘self-pitying’ breakdowns or self-doubt towards a state of positivity and self-confidence:

I had many mental breakdowns about it but then I think because of a lot of those situations I was able to be like, no, actually you are a lot better than you think you are and stop self-pitying because it is getting you nowhere (Lisa, service worker)

This passage presents Lisa’s movement from the moaner role to the far more favoured position of the agentic go-getter. Facilitating this change is an affective practice of *virtuously declining* negativity. Just as one might pull back from the pleasures of ‘naughty’ foods, this practice hinges on refusing to indulge negative thoughts and inclinations. Nicky’s (influencer) account below illustrates this practice in action:

previously I would always focus on the negative and have a bit of a pity party and was quite you know, everything would defeat me and I I really would let every little tiny thing in a day get to me and I would be like, well that was a shit day. And then, effectively the rest of my day would be shit because my mindset was terrible and I would let it get me down, whereas I was like right, if I’ve got the power in my brain to sort of have these negative views of myself and these negative I guess connotations of what I’m doing, if I can switch that to a positive mindset then surely I can train my brain into either loving parts of myself that I didn’t previously or achieve more in a day because I can actually use my brain to turn that all around

Recalling the cognitive psychology backbone of this repertoire, the practice of *virtuously declining* negativity is enabled by a decisive ‘flip switch’: for Lisa, a self-directed ‘no’, and

for Nicky, the realisation that ‘right [...] I can actually use my brain to turn all that around’.

In this regard, virtuous refusals of negativity loosely adopt the narrative conventions of addiction stories, wherein distress— hitting ‘rock bottom’—triggers personal growth.

Nicky’s refusal to continue to indulge herself in a ‘pity party’ facilitates a prized postfeminist position: both improved productivity and (‘achieve more in a day’) and self-love (‘loving parts of myself that I didn’t previously’).

As an affective practice, virtuously declining negativity reaffirms the status of negative emotions as self-indulgent and unproductive. This has consequential effects. The disruptive potential of negative thoughts makes voicing them undesirable:

when negativity arises in your mind just trying to, you know focus on the positive rather rather than focusing on the negative. And I try and talk less about things. [...] I try and just like let things go, anything negative I just try and let it go rather than verbalising it (Gemma, service worker)

While virtuous refusals may appear to offer freedom from negativity and negative habits, this practice appears to be predicated on tight-lipped control over thoughts and emotional expression. While Gemma’s account does not specify the kind of negativity in play, it is clear from others’ talk that virtuous refusals of negativity extend beyond the ‘little’ irritations that surface in Nicky’s account to encompass refusals of self-pity (Lisa) and sadness (Jessie). In this regard, virtuous refusal fits comfortably into a wider routine of feminised feeling positions and affective practices (Braun, 2009; Gill, 2007; Stuart & Donaghue, 2012), which, although relying on a vocabulary of freedom and volition, have disciplinary—or at least contradictory—effects.

Positivity in practice: Triumphant positivity

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3 So far, we have explored two affective–discursive repertoires of positivity, analysing the
4 logics and figures that animate them, and examining the two leading affective practices they
5 present: *keeping emotions in check*, and *virtuously declining negativity*. In this final section,
6 we consider a third affective practice: *triumphant positivity*, a determined self-fortification
7 with positive energy and thoughts. This practice is distinctive because it doesn't mark
8 participants' general positivity talk, appearing instead in anecdotes of putting positivity into
9 practice. Triumphant positivity's utility as a practice arises in situations where one's capacity
10 for positivity was put to the test by an external source—usually an unpleasant or nasty
11 person.
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15 Triumphant positivity took shape in participants' talk as a counter-attacking affective practice
16 designed to meet—and repel—the negativity of others. For example, Kate (influencer)
17 worked to 'ward' herself against negative people by visualising a mirror deflecting 'any
18 negativity... if someone's thinking something negative about me or saying something it just
19 goes straight back on them':
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23 sometimes in that situation I've greeted someone and they're all fired up and I'm just
24 positive and smiling, it's something that they're not expecting you know [...] you're
25 not giving them what they're expecting. You're not reflecting their negativity
26 essentially
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30 Kate's smiles are a kind of surprise attack: 'you're not giving them what they're expecting'.
31 This triumph of personal positivity registers as a pleasurable interactional victory. Jessie
32 (service worker) shared a similar story of handling a 'really angry' customer at the drive
33 through where she worked:
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37 I like repeated his order and I was like still smiling I didn't, I was like [Jessie] you can
38 let this affect you or you can like, like you know not let it affect you and so he was
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3 still really angry and then I was just like “oh have a good day!” because, as cheesy as
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5 it is I love the saying kill them with kindness
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9 Despite the customer’s poor behaviour, Jessie was ‘still smiling’, satisfied with her capacity
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11 to ‘kill’ negative emotions with a weaponised form of good cheer. A similarly triumphant
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13 tone marks Nicky’s (influencer) account of her response to receiving ‘really horrible’
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15 messages online:
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19 you have got people that will I guess, call you ugly or fat or you know that sort of
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21 thing. And you know literally my response to something like that would be, “thanks
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23 so much for your opinion, I hope you have a wonderful day, ☺”
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27 The triumphant tone of this practice suggests that it confers a degree of power and
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29 satisfaction. Once again, however, we see that successfully practising positivity demands
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31 very tight affective regulation; in this case, renouncing both critique of badly-behaved others
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33 and one’s own vulnerability to hurtful conduct. In Nicky’s account, for example, there is no
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35 space to explore and critique the ‘horrible messages’ she receives. Instead, their impact is
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37 glossed over as if hatefulness had no effect and as if there had been no trespass.
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41 Strikingly, almost any experience could be amenable to triumphant positivity: with this
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43 repertoire in one’s affective arsenal, very few situations register as simply bad. Instead,
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45 distressing events become more fodder for triumphant positivity. Gemma (service worker)
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47 offered an arresting example this practice at work. She described a shocking series of events
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49 that included being run over by a car and then subsequently left by her partner while
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51 recovering from her injuries:
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55 Yeah and so, the person I was with ended up breaking up with me a few weeks after
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57 my accident. And when I reflected on it I was like I should have been more positive if
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59 I had been happier if I had been more positive he would have sort of stayed with me.
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3 And that wasn't the person he saw throughout our relationship I had never been, sort
4 of negative and, unhappy. Unhappy he never saw that side of me until my accident.
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7 [...] And then I knew I just had to sort of pick myself up and change my attitude.
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11 Here, it is Gemma's lack of positivity that warrants her partner's actions. And, while the
12 narrative appears to evidence failed positivity, its framing as a learning experience allows
13 Gemma to take up a more favourable affective position in its retelling: she has since picked
14 herself up and is 'more positive [now] than I was before my accident'. The disorienting
15 affective register of Gemma's account is an indicator of the extraordinary explanatory work
16 positivity discourse is doing, as injury and abandonment are forcefully reworked as missed
17 opportunities for the practice of positivity.
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31 **Concluding Discussion**
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34 This analysis has outlined two distinctive understandings of positivity. One repertoire
35 constructs positivity as a magnetic interpersonal energy; a second repertoire locates positivity
36 in a particular style of thought that both demonstrates agency and secures progress. Where
37 the latter valorises positivity as a way of optimising oneself and one's situation, the former
38 emphasises relationality, moralising positivity as a means of attracting and inspiring others.
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40 Our analysis has also identified four figures that traverse these accounts: the positive person
41 and the negative drag, the positive go-getter and the immobilised moaner. Finally, we have
42 discussed three affective-discursive practices that are closely associated with positivity:
43 keeping emotions in check, virtuously declining negativity and triumphant positivity. While
44 articulated by the participants in free and agentic terms, these affective practices produce a
45 narrowed field of emotional expression, and place negativity, complaint and vulnerability out
46 of bounds. At the same time, the different repertoires, figures and affective practices we
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3 identify are constitutive threads that illuminate the specificity and detail of positivity in
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5 practice, and its differing resonance and effects.
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8 It is clear that positivity is no simple phenomenon; nor is it apolitical. Injunctions to ‘think
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10 positive’ form an easily visible strata in a complex array of gendered feeling rules and
11
12 affective practices holding women in place. The repertoire of positivity as an agentic
13
14 cognitive practice aligns clearly with core elements of idealised neoliberal femininities,
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16 predicated on demonstrating confidence and masking injury (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Scharff,
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18 2016). Our analysis of positivity as an embodied relational practice suggests that positivity
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20 imperatives are also tethered to a broader cultural inheritance that positions ‘good’ women as
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22 producers of other people’s happiness (Ahmed, 2010a), acting as the ‘angels’ in the
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24 household or workplace. Perhaps, then, the pull of positivity discourse lies in its capacity to
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26 weave together two powerful cultural formations and their associated feeling positions,
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28 offering women a hybrid of traditional and newer femininities: something old and something
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30 new. Caring for others is re-defined as modelling positivity skills, encouraging and enabling
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32 others to ‘look on the bright side’ as one works to instantiate this bright side in one’s own
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34 life. In effect, positivity discourse offers new ways of being a woman meshing with more
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36 conventional femininities.
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43 It seems likely positivity discourse may also play an important role in sustaining gendered
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45 divisions of labour. Our three cohorts—mothers, service workers and social media
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47 influencers—vary on a number of dimensions: paid versus unpaid labour, entrepreneurial
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49 business versus wage-based employment, and potentially in social class status. Yet, all three
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51 groups inhabit uncertain, contradictory and ambiguous feminised social structural positions
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53 where defining and claiming specialised expertise is not straightforward, and social value has
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55 to be worked up and ‘sold’. Service workers, for instance, are celebrated as ‘essential’, yet
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57 the economic rewards indicate that this valuing does not translate into power, dignity and
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prestige. The expertise involved is often devalued as commonplace, involving no specialist training, or naturalised as something women are inherently good at. Positivity discourse restores some dignity, however, and marks out some specific expertise, and skill. Mothering is similarly poised between the naturalised and highly celebrated: the most important role in the world and yet not a ‘proper’ job. Positivity discourse helps define mothering through disciplined work on the self, offers some markers for doing mothering well, and finds some specific expertise to claim. Similarly, involved in a new kind of marketing, influencers are at a further front line of uncertainty concerning the expertise and economic and social value they deliver to their audiences. Positivity is a dispositional solution to that problem—a luminous practice in a changing labour market where work and expertise are increasingly enmeshed with personality (Walkerdine & Bansel, 2010).

Finally, we offer a brief reflection on the psychological investments and spaces for living that the leading repertoires and affective practices open up. Broadly speaking, these repertoires individualise and responsabilise. The two repertoires come together to entrain and sustain an unbalanced form of personal and interpersonal responsibility. On one hand, women are called on to keep positive, regardless of their treatment by others; at the same time, a second relational logic of positivity makes women responsible for the effects of their own dispositions on those around them. Positivity intensifies demands on women’s emotional management, asking them to sustain pleasant and pleasing dispositions for themselves *and* for the benefit of others. Positivity also individualises so that social trouble and potentially oppressive social relations become reworked as personal failure, as a loss of the cheery perspective. The naming of trouble in feminist or in other critical terms risks a framing that one is choosing to wallow in victimhood. The remedy for trouble becomes intensified work on the self and an ethics of moving on.

Our empirical work raises questions, then, for feminists about the position of positivity as a ‘winning’ emotional style of our times, and the personal and collective implications of positivity practices. Simple prompts to be positive package up a far knottier array of affective–discursive practices that appear to hold inequitable patterns of emotional regulation in place. This brings the co-incidence of ‘relentless positivity’ with growing inequalities and rising levels of distress into sharper focus: positivity practices plug into a wider social circuitry that, by calling on women to reject negativity and disavow vulnerability, might also silence possibilities for resistance. Finally, this work enriches our understanding of the contradictory qualities of affective practices, which like triumphant positivity may feel immensely satisfying, pleasing and powerful while sustaining, in Berlant’s (2006) terms, ‘cruel’ attachments to damaging social formations.

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