

Ambivalent aspirations: Young women negotiating postfeminist subjectivity in media work

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Abstract

This article contributes to the critical literature on postfeminist articulations of young women as ideal subjects of aspiration and meritocracy by focussing on young women's lived experiences and ways of navigating the contradictory effects of these articulations. Drawing on ethnographic research on the creative and cultural industries in Finland, the article examines how women aspiring to careers in the media field negotiate postfeminist and neoliberal enticements to inhabit the position of an aspirational subject. The findings indicate that young women's responses to these enticements are more complex than is often assumed in theories emphasising the regulatory power of neoliberal and postfeminist cultural scripts. It is argued that young women recognise the ideological invitations of postfeminist 'aspiration scripts', but they respond to these interpellations in ways imbued with ambivalence and simultaneously characterised by compliance and criticism.

Keywords

aspirations, creative and cultural industries, gender, postfeminism, subjectivity

Introduction

Gendered discourses on aspiration and meritocracy that position young women as ideal subjects of success have become culturally widespread in Euro-American contexts during recent decades. These articulations can be perceived as ideological invitations that encourage young women to invest in their employability through self-cultivation, and

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simultaneously silence critiques of the gendered inequalities in the labour market (Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). These articulations thus can be characterised as postfeminist as they celebrate female capacity by mixing feminist articulations of empowerment and equality with neoliberal rationality that stresses individual responsibility for success (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker and Negra, 2007).

Focussing on young women in the creative and cultural industries (CCI), this article approaches postfeminist ‘aspiration scripts’ as regulatory ideals integral to the wider neoliberal culture. While invitations that position young women as subjects simultaneously possessing (economic) capacity and needing self-transformation (e.g. Scharff, 2018: 19) are not exclusive to the CCI, young women in this field can be considered to be paradigms for the analysis of the contours of gendered aspirational subjectivity. First, as both young women and creative workers, they are positioned as emblematic subjects of the entrepreneurial, meritocratic ethos of ‘new work’ (Gill, 2014; Scharff, 2018). Second, creative and cultural workers are urged to invest their individuality into their work in the CCI, which bundles work and subjectivity together based on ideas of self-actualisation and autonomy expressed by the mantra ‘do what you love’ (Duffy, 2017: 4). Furthermore, the ideal of the open, meritocratic CCI has rendered gendered inequalities ‘unspeakable’ (Gill, 2014), creating a fertile field for the growth of postfeminist ideas.

Earlier research has documented that postfeminist and neoliberal discourses invite young women in particular to become aspirational, individualistic and self-responsible (e.g. Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Rottenberg, 2014, 2019). Less attention, though, has been paid to the ways in which these incitements are lived out and negotiated at the level of subjectivity. This article traces how postfeminist aspiration scripts are received and negotiated on a subjective level, contributing to filling a key lacuna in the critical analysis of postfeminism (see Adamson, 2017: 325). This ethnographic research explores how young Finnish women who aspire to CCI careers respond to postfeminist invitations to become ‘aspirational subjects of capacity’.

This article explores the contours and contradictions of postfeminist aspirational subjectivity through a qualitative analysis of interviews and ethnographic observations with young women studying in the media field at Finnish universities of applied sciences (Finnish qualification title *medianomi*). In doing so, this article contributes to the still small body of research examining how postfeminist and neoliberal discourses on aspiration shape subjectivities on the individual level (e.g. Allen, 2014; Duffy, 2017). Earlier influential critical work suggested that young women in the CCI internalise the ideal of individualised, aspirational and entrepreneurial female subjectivity and showed how this mode of subjectivity tends to displace social critiques and structural inequalities (Duffy, 2016, 2017; Scharff, 2016). Following this vein, this article indicates that young women also recognise the ideological interpellations in postfeminist aspiration scripts and accordingly aim to cultivate their selves. Yet, through shedding light on the ambivalences in their negotiations, I show that their responses are more complex than assumed in theories emphasising the regulatory power of postfeminist and neoliberal invitations.

Exploring the ‘messy empirical actualities’ (McKee, 2009: 473) and the conflicting rationalities on which the women draw in their narratives, I argue that their responses do not only embrace postfeminist rationality, but instead are imbued with ambivalence. The mixture of compliance and non-compliance that defines their responses can be

characterised as ‘meeting postfeminism halfway’. To some extent, the young women comply with the gendered invitations to transform themselves into better economic subjects (Banet-Weiser, 2018). However, they also attempt to maintain their integrity, to stay true to who they are and to not let work life colonise their values. They utilise these strategies as responses to resist injury from the postfeminist interpellations. Through unfolding these arguments, this research provides a nuanced, original contribution to the literature on gender, work and subjectivity in postfeminist and neoliberal contexts.

The research context is Finland, where, as in other countries, discourses highlighting meritocracy and achieved gender equality have become prominent. Finland often presents itself as a ‘model country for gender equality’ (e.g. Jauhola and Kantola, 2016), but its relatively high level of gender equality also supports postfeminist articulations. For example, Finland’s previous right-conservative government’s programme mentions gender equality only in the infamous utterance that ‘women and men are equal’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2015: 8; see also, Elomäki et al., 2019: 823). Women’s labour market participation is high, but the wage gap between men and women persists (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020b), and women still more often work under part-time and temporary contracts (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020a). Gendered imbalances also characterise the media field. Women account for a majority of students in higher education programmes in the field (Vipunen (Education Statistics Finland), 2019a), but hold only one third of positions in the higher echelons, as of 2011 (Ruostesaari, 2014: 97). Furthermore, in journalism, female students are less likely to find employment, and female journalists are generally paid less than their male colleagues (Savolainen and Zilliacus-Tikkanen, 2013). Simultaneously, media education programmes have gained so much popularity that the number of graduates exceeds the number of available jobs. For instance, in 2017, 19% of graduates from media programmes in Finnish polytechnics remained unemployed 1 year after graduation (Vipunen (Education Statistics Finland), 2019b). Thus, the struggle ‘to stand out in an overcrowded employment market’ characterises the field (Duffy, 2017: xi).

This article is structured as follows. I next outline the debates on postfeminist aspirations in the CCI context and then present the research data and methodology. In the following empirical section, I show that as a regulatory ideal, the postfeminist ethos of aspiration manifests for the young women as two imperatives: (1) the individuality imperative, the expectation that they will perceive their personal character as a key instrument of work and remodel it accordingly and (2) the productivity imperative, the expectation that they will become productive individuals who prove their value through extensive investments in work. Through examining the young women’s responses to these imperatives, I demonstrate how they seek to selectively inhabit the position of aspirational postfeminist subject while also crafting alternative subject positions. Finally, I discuss the implications of the findings.

Postfeminism, neoliberalism and aspirational subjectivity

Previous research has traced how postfeminist and neoliberal rationalities work together as forms of governmentality, calling forth female subjects who are aspirational, entrepreneurial, responsible, autonomous, resilient, competitive and confident (Gill, 2007, 2017;

Gill and Orgad, 2015, 2017, 2018; McRobbie, 2009; Rottenberg, 2014). Postfeminist rationality can be viewed as a gendered version of neoliberalism (Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011: 7) as both rationalities are characterised by individualism, downplay structural inequalities and highlight individual responsibility for self-management. Furthermore, both demand self-discipline and self-improvement, especially from women, leading Gill (2007) to suggest that neoliberalism is gendered and positions women as its ideal subjects. This article takes as its starting point Gill's (2007, 2017) definition of postfeminism as a critical object of analysis integral to the wider neoliberal culture. Neoliberalism is approached as not only an economic system, but also a political rationality that reshapes subjectivities, inviting individuals to view themselves as enterprises (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1989) and concomitantly, influences their understandings of what it means to be a 'good worker' (Adamson, 2017).

While becoming aspirational can be viewed as a broader neoliberal imperative inviting individuals to craft an employable self (Mendick et al., 2018), women face especially high requirements to better their labour market position through self-transformation. Gill (2017) suggests that the (increasingly psychologised) postfeminist logic encourages individuals to cultivate 'the 'right' kinds of dispositions for surviving in neoliberal society: aspiration, confidence, resilience and so on' (p. 610). Accordingly, this article attends to how postfeminist scripts invite women to work on not only their skills, but also their attitudes and mindsets to cultivate an employable subjectivity (e.g. Adamson, 2017; Gill, 2017; Rottenberg, 2019) and become 'better economic subjects' (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

The demand for aspirational, entrepreneurial, self-cultivating subjectivity is especially strong in the sites of working life, where the requirement to work on the self has become predominant (Heelas, 2002), reflecting the broader subjectification of work (Julkunen, 2008). In the post-Fordist working life, work is ubiquitously being framed as a central area of individuality, and workers are expected to impose personal meanings on their jobs. Consequently, 'the individual is not to be emancipated from work, perceived merely as a task or a means to an end, but to be fulfilled in work, now construed as an activity through which we produce, discover and experience ourselves' (Rose, 1989: 103).

This article builds on the small but growing body of critical scholarship mapping the lived experiences and the gendered outlines of aspirational and entrepreneurial subjectivity in the CCI context. Analysing the psychic life of neoliberalism based on interviews with female classical musicians, Scharff (2016) has observed that they adopt an entrepreneurial ethos characterised by continuous competition with the self and the absence of social critique. Allen (2014) has mapped how the middle-class rhetoric of aspiration encourages youth pursuing careers in media to 'become successful' while disregarding class differences in opportunities to achieve this goal. Duffy (2016, 2017) has developed the concept of aspirational labour to analyse emerging digital content producers such as fashion bloggers who wish to transform their unpaid blogging efforts into jobs in the social media industry.

The term 'aspirational labour', or the highly entrepreneurial practice of participation in often-unpaid activities to secure future work (Duffy, 2016, 2017), can be used to approach engagements with postfeminist scripts of self-cultivation. I join Duffy (2017: 7) in conceptualising aspiration as a temporal orientation to the future, the pursuit of present-day activities in response to incentives for future rewards. Rather than aspirational activities,

though, I am concerned with the practice of cultivating an aspirational subjectivity, which, drawing on Duffy (2017), can be viewed as cultivation of the present-day self based on incentives for future rewards. I investigate gendered postfeminist aspiration scripts that include guidelines for such self-cultivation and provide cognitive and affective resources with which the aspirants may engage.

Data and methods

This article draws on research that consisted of interviews and ethnographic observations conducted with students in media programmes in two Finnish polytechnics. The Finnish higher education system comprises universities and polytechnics (also known as universities for applied sciences), which emphasise relevance to working life and the role of applied knowledge. I observed bachelor's degree programmes that typically took 4 years and included one or two work experience periods. I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with students, most of whom expected soon to graduate and transition into the labour market.

The participants specialised in four programmes: journalism, graphic design, animation and digital communication. Accordingly, their particular aspirations differed and thus were not the primary object of the analysis; instead, it focussed on the discourse on aspiration as a regulatory ideal inviting the young women to cultivate an employable subjectivity. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 31 years, and their backgrounds generally were (lower) middle class. The majority of the participants already had work experience in their field, often gained through work experience periods, freelance work and part-time and summer jobs. The interviews lasted 1.5–2.5 hours each and took place in school facilities, cafés and the participants' workplaces. The interview topics included the participants' paths to and experiences of education and their aspirations, future hopes and worries. As education has crucial influences on youths' subjectivities and aspirations (e.g. Allen, 2014), I conducted periodic ethnographic observations in the two polytechnics, particularly in courses related to working life skills. I used the insights from this fieldwork to contextualise the interviews.

I thematically and discursively analysed the interviews and field notes. After familiarising myself with the data, I performed thematic close readings of the materials to analyse the participants' narratives of becoming workers and to identify bottom-up patterns. I then discursively analysed the identified patterns in the interview narratives as mediated by available cultural discourses and scripts (e.g. Lawler, 2008). I paid special attention to how postfeminist articulations of aspiration were negotiated, and I focussed on discursive acts of compliance and non-compliance as these ambivalences were significant in the data.

Importantly, although young women are often positioned as ideal postfeminist subjects, I do not intend to imply that they are more postfeminist than previous generations. Indeed, postfeminism is characterised by 'the diffusion of its address across different groups and contexts; it attempts to speak to women of different ages, classes, sexual orientations and so on' (Gill in Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 6). In the interviews, many participants self-identified as feminist, reflecting the cultural visibility feminism has recently gained in media culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Whereas some participants

positioned themselves as knowledgeable on feminist issues, for example, stressing that their feminism was intersectional and anti-racist, others expressed seemingly postfeminist utterances such as ‘gender does not matter anymore’. Consequently, instead of simply interpreting the participants as postfeminist, I explore their motivations for engaging with postfeminist aspiration scripts and highlight discrepancies in how they received these scripts.

Cultivation of character: the individuality imperative and its discontents

In this section, I discuss how the young women I encountered during my research responded to postfeminist scripts of self-cultivation which associated success with refashioning one’s persona and displaying the ‘right’ dispositions. This individuality imperative, as I call it, can be perceived as part of a ‘turn to character’ (Bull and Allen, 2018) in neoliberal societies and a ‘psychological turn’ in postfeminism (Gill, 2017), which both point towards increasing attention on women’s personality traits and cultivation of dispositions such as confidence.

Although not specifically mentioned in the interview questions, the idea of mastering the skill of cultivating one’s character to succeed in the labour market recurred in the interviews. Graphic design student Sofia was one of many participants who expressed how individual character is crucial to getting employment. She narrated that when she had started looking for an internship, she initially thought that her skills as an illustrator might help her stand out in a competitive labour market. However, she realised that employers sometimes placed even more value on candidates’ character being ‘a good fit’. Sofia stated:

Of course, it matters, your own competence. But personally, I feel what matters more is the way you appear in a job interview or what you have got to show for yourself in the application process. Like, it’s more important how much experience you have, and then social skills, so it’s not about being gifted or such, your skills. . . . Take graphic design, for example. I knew illustration, but that wasn’t all that important. Everyone found it interesting, but it wasn’t as much of an advantage as I had hoped.

Sofia recounted that during her job search, she had invested in conveying a sociable impression: ‘You’d look at yourself from the outside, try to figure out how to make yourself seem like an attractive employee. . . . These are the kinds of things one can learn’. Sofia’s insights show how the participants often framed the practice of self-cultivation not as self-realisation but, rather, as a specific form of aspirational labour and, indeed, a *skill* of cultivating the characteristics associated with employability (cf. Duffy, 2017: x). Sofia further highlighted the importance of cultivating the right dispositions: ‘Overall, it feels like that in working life, the ‘good guys’ get further than the skilled folks’.

The skill of character cultivation also manifested in education. The research participants – and their teachers – often highlighted the importance of confidence as ‘a skill to be learned’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 93). Journalism student Siiri stated that during the first year of education, the teachers ‘were quite direct and told that you have to have courage

and guts, at least in your work personality, that without it you are not going to go far'. Siiri remarked that she found this baffling: 'It felt a bit strange to tell first-year students that you have to have a certain personality in order to make it in the field'.

Even so, in education, certain characteristics were, indeed, associated with success in the field. During the fieldwork, I observed a class in performance skills for journalism students. At the beginning, the students were asked to introduce themselves in front of a camera placed in the middle of the classroom, an assignment that made the class buzz with nervous energy. The class then analysed the students' presentations for verbal clarity and content, body language and overall impression. The female students generally took up less space and held less open poses than the male students, so the other students and the teacher interpreted them as appearing more 'insecure'. Consequently, the teacher advised the female students on how to work on their presentation and appear confident on film by changing their body language.

Of course, comfort in front of the camera is necessary for journalists aspiring to work, for example, in television broadcasting. Even so, the advice given to the female students also demonstrates how in the postfeminist cultural landscape, women are assumed to reap career benefits from increasing their confidence as the gendered 'confidence gap' – an idea popularised by Kay and Shipman (2014) – is believed to block 'female success'. Indeed, another teacher also mentioned that appearing confident posed a particular challenge for many female students as they tended to question themselves more than male students, so potential employers might perceive them as less convincing. The teacher expressed concern that employers might favour seemingly self-assured men over more talented but less confident women, implying that increased confidence might open doors for women in the labour market. Although undoubtedly well-intentioned, the teachers' worries about female confidence resonate with postfeminist cultural scripts that do not take into account the patriarchal labour market culture and structures but, instead, assume that women's perceived lack of confidence poses an obstacle to their labour market success (Gill, 2017; Gill and Orgad, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014: 425). Indeed, confidence has been 'offered as the panacea for gendered wage gaps, exploitative labor, and the "glass ceiling" itself' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 93).

Given the cultural visibility of confidence and its association with success and employability in postfeminist aspiration scripts, various 'confidence-building techniques' unsurprisingly also appeared in the participants' aspirational toolkits. Henna, a digital communication student working in a male-dominated work environment in the technology field, stated that she had experienced not being taken seriously because of her gender. She described the techniques she used to trick herself into feeling more confident:

It works like this: you take up a role, but that role's good for you as you start believing in the role. You haven't been feeling all that confident, but then when you play the part, you're going to be confident even though you don't feel like you should be. And when you do that to yourself enough, one time you're like, 'Wow, I feel confident!'

For Henna, the confident 'role' resembled a costume she could wear, but in her experience, these strategies led to her being taken more seriously and being heard in the workplace. Riina, a journalism student pursuing a business communication career, told

that she adopted the popular self-help mantra of ‘fake it till you make it’, pretending to be confident even when she did not feel that way. She concluded, ‘That’s how my professional self-esteem has developed the most’. Henna and Riina thus framed confidence as a skill – and its mastery as a route to increased capacity.

In addition to confidence, the participants discussed learning the skill of self-promotion, which is considered to be crucial for finding CCI employment (Duffy, 2017). Freelance workers, in particular, often have to actively build their reputations (Pruchniewska, 2018). Accordingly, many participants highlighted the need to promote themselves and even treat their personality as a selling point. Ida, a journalism student, stated that creating a prominent self-brand is important ‘even in financial terms’ as it affects ‘how much people are paid and how “successful” they are’. She suggested that knowing how to stand out could lead to more stable jobs as employers do not want to lose workers with visible self-brands. Similarly, Nora, a graphic design student, asserted that knowing how to stand out is key to gaining employment as ‘the agencies do not even open all the applications’: ‘You gotta be a persona, have personality. I’m worried sometimes, if I’m just . . . you know, that I don’t stand out’. She mentioned that her friend had gotten a job with a creative agency ‘only because they [employers] knew from social media who my friend was’.

Although the participants recognised the association of certain characteristics with employability, many viewed cultivating these dispositions with reluctance and anxiety. Katariina, who studied digital communication, described herself as ‘a person on the shy side’ and pointed out that she did not recognise herself in the figure of the ideal self-promoting subject. She expressed discomfort and frustration about the demand to self-transform, asking: ‘Well, should I try to be something completely different then, like what they’re looking for in the job postings, acting like some captivating superstar?’ Even so, Katariina associated employability with being/becoming the confident, self-promoting subject – what the employers are generally ‘looking for’. Journalism student Martta observed that many successful young journalists in Finland build very visible self-brands. Martta mentioned one young female journalist who had managed to make a name for herself by creating a highly active public presence. However, Martta also expressed that her quiet, peaceful personality conflicted with the idea of self-promotion.

I suggest that this reluctance conveyed by Martta and Katariina might also reflect the conflicting expectations that women face. In her analysis of female musicians, Scharff (2015) too observed that the normative combination of femininity and modesty makes it hard for women in particular to engage in self-promotional activities: although self-promotion is crucial for finding employment, women have to balance ‘the fine line between being confident and being pushy’ (Scharff, 2015: 104). Furthermore, my participants’ reluctance to embrace self-promotion might also be explained by the cultural value placed on modesty in the Finnish context. Indeed, a recent study showed that even the country’s top 0.1% of earners highlight their ordinariness and humility, displaying the strong Lutheran cultural influences in Finland (Kantola and Kuusela, 2018: 376).

Elomäki et al. (2019) coined the term ‘affective virtuosity’ to describe Finnish feminist academics’ affective strategies to gain respectability and influence policy-making. I suggest that young women in the CCI also need affective virtuosity as they have to constantly negotiate conflicting gendered cultural expectations: they must be confident and self-promoting without appearing to be pushy. A further dimension of affective virtuosity

emerges in the participants' discussion on how to invest their personality in work but not take rejection personally.

Graphic design students in particular talked about having to learn a specific skill to thrive amid competition: protecting themselves from feeling rejected. Nora stated that when presenting her work and applying for jobs, she had to deal with rejection that felt personal:

In the creative field, it feels like you put a part of your very own self into your work [laughs]. If you get critiqued, you can really feel it deep inside. Sometimes, I'm struggling a lot with my self-esteem in this line of work, in particular. Just filling out an internship application, you'll feel like shit, like you can't apply here or there.

Nora found good self-esteem to be crucial to withstand constant judgement of one's work by others. Similarly, Johanna, another graphic design student, stated that she was trying to learn to not 'take it personally':

You put your own persona on the line when you're doing something visual. And if it's not accepted, . . . if someone says that they don't like it, I can feel it here in my heart [laughs]. . . . It's a thing you need to work on constantly. You need to be conscious of the fact that I am not the same thing as the work I do. You need to accept all critiques as you hear a whole fucking lot of it in this business.

These excerpts reveal the potential harm related to becoming a labouring subject expected to treat work as a key arena of self-realisation. Mastering the skill of not taking critiques personally even when one's personality is evaluated is among the crueller demands linked to the individuality imperative. When discussing the requirement to stifle hurt feelings, the interviewees did not address gender, but I suggest that suppressing disappointment to avoid being judged as weak or emotional is demanded of women due to the long-standing socio-historical idea of women as 'too emotional'. Stifling hurt feelings then represents a further mode of gendered affective virtuosity (cf. Elomäki et al., 2019).

The participants' negotiations of the individuality imperative thus point to the merging of character and skills that make increasing self-confidence, cultivating respectability and promoting oneself part of the CCI professional skillset. The participants recognised these demands but viewed them with ambivalence. Indeed, the young women had to negotiate conflicting gendered cultural expectations: they found that the invitation to become a confident, self-asserting, respectable subject demands more negotiation by women historically expected to be modest and to be coded as less convincing than by men associated with competitiveness and occupation of public space.

The participants did not always embrace the individuality imperative. Many expressed reluctance to change themselves as a person to 'make it', and they resisted the individuality imperative that expected them to refashion the self. We can see this resistance in Martta's attempt to find work where she is respected for who she is:

I have a pretty calm disposition, and I try to, all unnoticed, fight for the people who don't show off, those who are understanding and good at their jobs. I try to underline that we need people like that and journalists like that. I have been going through some stuff – a feeling of inadequacy – in that I don't enjoy being in the spotlight or branding myself or anything like that. I don't

enjoy the unnecessary stuff around journalism at all. I've been going through a bit of a crisis. Can I be a good journalist if I don't want to keep up with this topic I'm writing about 24/7? Can I be a good journalist if I want to keep my work and my personal life separate? Things like that. Little by little, I've come to the conclusion and learned to accept that I'll surely find work that's meaningful, challenging, new, innovative and that respects me as a person, so I don't have to be a full-on chameleon.

Martta explained that she recognised the association between success and certain characteristics (putting oneself forward, investing oneself wholly in work and being a 'full-on chameleon'), but she seemed to refuse to align herself with these ideals on ethical grounds. Alma expressed similar sentiments when she questioned the intrinsic value of self-promotion:

I think the kind of artificial brand building is dumb and silly. When I'm on social media, I'm kind of restrained but promoting my own views and values. I guess my Twitter bio states I'm a feminist and all that. . . . You can highlight your persona, not be all grey and dull. Maybe it's good for a journalist to bring themselves forward; it's all part of transparency, which is important.

Here, Alma discursively distanced herself from others doing self-branding for its own sake, and she framed her online presence as more authentic than what she termed 'artificial brand building'. Scholars have also documented mixed feelings related to gendered self-promotion among CCI workers, especially the pressure to stay authentic and not sell out (Duffy, 2017; Pruchniewska, 2018). Alma could be interpreted as attempting to capitalise on popular feminism's new cultural visibility (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020) and her self-brand as an 'authentic feminist' (Pruchniewska, 2018), but her interview indicated that this was not exclusively the case. Indeed, throughout her interview, she insisted on the priority of ethics over career success. For instance, she criticised the idea of basing individuals' value and worth on their labour market success:

This is a world where people are trying to create some kind of career success stories, and everybody's careers and lives need to be success stories. Of course, people need to strive for what they want, but if someone wants to be a potato farmer, I think that's fine. Or if someone wants to stop climbing upwards in this market economy, that's fine as well.

I suggest that the participants' expressed reluctance to reinvent their personality can be considered to be a non-compliance strategy in a context framing cultivating one's character as a normative aspirational strategy. The participants did not uncritically embrace the postfeminist invitations to self-transformation but recognised them and drew on them as affective-cognitive resources. The participants revealed similar ambivalences when they discussed the imperative to be productive, as explored in the next section.

Escape from the 'henhouse'? Negotiating the productivity imperative

The analysis in this section considers the participants' ambivalences related to the productivity imperative, or the expectation to become better economic subjects through

increased productivity. This imperative is viewed as part of the wider logic of value in neoliberalism that sees all areas of life as fields to be capitalised (Brown, 2015). This analysis explores how the logic of productivity shapes the contours of gendered aspirational subjectivity and also demonstrates how engaging with the rationality of productivity does not exclude the possibility of political critique.

The idea of endless improvement, paired with freelancing, project work and temporary contracts, often makes creative labourers especially vulnerable to demands to be constantly active and productive. As Scharff (2016) observed, creative work stresses the idea of being constantly active as ‘there are no limits to self-improvement’ (p. 112). In my interview materials, the idea of productive subjectivity also emerged in such utterances (cf. Scharff, 2016: 113). Ida, who was working part time as a journalist, stated:

I gotta do a whole lot of extra work that nobody’s requesting but *that I demand of myself* as I want to do a good job and be successful. Of course, I prepare for interviews and do stuff like this during working hours, but yeah, learning new things, you need to do that during your time off as well if you want to know about them. (italics added)

Ida’s framing of these productive efforts as voluntary resonates with Duffy’s (2017) observation that ‘paying off’ discourses are central to aspirational labour. Ida, in her interview, drew on discourses on passion and pleasure, remarking that her work almost felt like a hobby, so she did not mind investing her time off in work-related activities. However, many other participants stressed the importance of being productive, but they also actively sought to avoid being ‘always on’ (Gill, 2014). Accordingly, they often presented time management strategies and optimised productivity as solutions.

The educational programmes also emphasised working efficiently. For example, journalism students attended classes on how to improve their time management skills. I also observed a guest lecture organised for digital communication students given by a manager at a large media company. She advised the students against working long hours as it could lead to burnout. In this way, she pushed against the ‘always-on’ work culture often associated with the CCI, expecting workers to demonstrate their value by working long hours (e.g. Gill, 2014). Instead, the speaker suggested that the students optimise their time use during working hours by minimising distractions and disconnecting from personal social media accounts, reflecting the popular productivity mantra to ‘work smarter, not harder’. The students proposed similar strategies with roots in productivity literature (Gregg, 2018). Riina, a journalism student working in marketing, pushed the idea of optimising her productivity by ‘working smart’:

My dream job is a four-day work week. . . . I value my free time. It’d be cool if I could work a shorter week but still be just as efficient as I believe that people can’t work that efficiently in a full 40-hour week. Having six-hour workdays or four-day work weeks, that would be optimal. *And you could achieve pretty much the same things as you do now.* (italics added)

The views of both Riina and lecturer imply the possibility to work fewer hours without doing less work. These framings are representative of the highly individualised time management discourse that emphasises individuals’ self-management skills while

downplaying structural solutions to lighten workloads (Gregg, 2018: 3, n3). In Gregg's (2018) words, time management self-help prompts individuals to ask: 'Could your biggest productivity problem be you?' (p. 90).

However, other participants also talked about how the creative process does not always go as smoothly as expected. Graphic design student Olivia told how the failure to be constantly productive evoked feelings of inadequacy:

There have been these really kind of personal creative blocks . . . when I haven't been able to . . . bring anything forward or really come up with any ideas you really had to come up with. It's caused some crises and feelings of inferiority as you haven't done anything, anything people have been expecting.

She stated that especially towards the end of a project, 'you just sit all day long in front of the screen, trying to get things done before the deadline'. Olivia explained that she planned to adopt mindfulness meditation techniques to manage her stress. She thus, like Riina, resorted to individualised strategies to cope with productivity demands.

The conditionality of future jobs might increase the pressure to demonstrate productivity. Indeed, as Scharff (2016: 116) observed, feelings of self-doubt and anxiety might be linked to the precarious nature of creative work. Olivia also described worrying about her future wellbeing and possible burnout. Her grim view of her industry became apparent when she lamented the basis of contemporary working life on the expectation of 'doing as much as you can as fast as you can'. She compared it with factory farming: 'You just got to do as much work as possible at a really fast pace to make it profitable. . . . It's like a henhouse: lay as many eggs as possible, as fast as possible'.

The 'henhouse' is a bleak metaphor for productive, competitive femininity in the CCI. It has often been suggested that in neoliberal and postfeminist contexts, 'the value of the person is constructed on the basis of applying oneself as a productive subject in all spheres of life' (Adamson, 2017: 317). The participants recognised these interpellations but emphasised attempts to renegotiate them. For example, Sofia described how the pressure to spend time productively affected her free time: 'You find that everything you do should have an end goal' (cf. Skeggs and Wood, 2012). However, she criticised this expectation and tried to allow herself 'some time off that is not meant to be productive'. Similar to many others, journalism student Lotta sought to balance on the tightrope between being sufficiently productive without straining oneself:

That's the ideal – not putting too much strain on yourself—but I understand it's a utopia. Of course, work is going to be something of a burden, at least in our field of work. But if the burden's too much or just right, that's different.

Many participants thus negotiated the productivity imperative, but while they recognised the invitation to become productive subjects on a subjective level, their interviews were not void of structural and political criticisms. For instance, journalism student Iiris questioned why so many (knowledge) workers risk burning themselves out, while others are unemployed:

Wearing yourself out in working life by the time you're fifty, it sounds so stupid. . . . If we could divide the work more, people's lives could be more balanced, so some people wouldn't be out of work while others were on the verge of exhaustion. It's such a wretched set-up. If you could just reorganise hiring, people could be better off.

While Iris suggested that a more even distribution of work, Ella took structural criticisms further. She especially criticised being productive for productivity's sake and described some CCI work as 'good for nothing' or a 'waste of human potential'. As an example of the harmful use of workers' productive potential, she mentioned creating addictive online content for children. Furthermore, she explicitly underscored the importance of non-productive time:

To me, it's important that everybody has a right to time of their own. Everyone would have the time or the opportunity to not be productive in some way. I don't know how that's possible, but it should be fostered.

However, Ella expressed that at present, her political desires starkly clashed with the reality of contemporary capitalist society:

When I'm talking about these my future plans or whatever, it's at odds with the kind of utopia I'm wishing for and that I'm waiting for. It's funny like how I got these two lives side by side: the everyday life I gotta perform and the dream [of a different kind of society] out there somewhere.

Describing herself as anti-capitalist, Ella advocated for more sustainable ways of organising work and hoped for a universal basic income of 1200 euros.

Indeed, many participants' narratives resonate with Skeggs' (2014) argument that '[I]iving within the logic of capital does not prefigure internalization' (p. 15). Although it has often been suggested that postfeminist rationalities displace and silence social and structural critiques (e.g. Gill and Scharff, 2011), these interview findings complicate this finding, often framing economic growth and efforts to increase productivity as unsustainable. Alma drew a parallel between the ideas of economic growth and individual success: 'I see this economic-growth-capitalist world as a manifestation of the fact that people's lives need to be some kind of success stories'. She thus described how capitalism's pursuit of growth on an intimate level engenders a normative imperative to become (economically) successful.

Correspondingly, on the subjective level, many participants acutely felt the expectation to become a productive subject, but on the macro scale, many criticised the logic of productivity underpinning capitalism and advocated more sustainable, ethical ways of organising work. In the remainder of this analysis, I demonstrate how the participants sought to juggle these unresolved contradictions.

Many highlighted the importance of their values such as environmental concerns and (gender) equality, and they sought to harness their aspirations to advocate for what they considered to be a better society. Olivia was among the many who mentioned wanting to use their careers to advance social and environmental sustainability:

It [my dream job] would be at the centre of sustainable development and the circular economy. It would be about actively doing things that remedy the faults we have in the world. And [it would] be actively for the good of nature. . . . I want to work in a place like that, where I could give something to work that is done for the good of the planet. I don't know what my personal input would be there, but anyhow.

Similarly, Katariina described how aspirations for certain job titles did not primarily guide her goals; she could be a WordPress developer or a service designer as long as she could promote sustainable development. Furthermore, Katariina and many others performed unpaid volunteer work to support the causes they considered to be important, often through non-government organisations involved in environmental issues, human rights and humanitarian aid. These volunteer activities provided good work experience in a field where jobs were hard to come by without previous experience, but many participants emphasised their social motivations. Indeed, the participants' volunteer work can be interpreted as signalling that aspirational labour (Duffy, 2017) can be done for both individual and societal benefits.

As Duffy (2017) points out, the 'tension between internal desires and external demands is intrinsic to the struggle between creativity and constraint that has long characterized paid cultural work' (p. 135). For the participants, this tension involved not only free, creative self-expression, but also maintenance of their personal ethics while working corporate jobs. The participants acknowledged that in their early careers, they might not be able to be selective about their jobs. Nora stated that she had been disillusioned about the possibility that she might be able to choose only projects supporting her values. She expressed that as a junior employee, she could not be too picky and decide to 'do only feminist stuff': 'I try to keep my feet on the ground. . . . The reality is that you just have to grind away'.

Even so, many participants mentioned that they did not want to promote organisations with values they deemed unacceptable, including the oil and gas company Neste, other 'greedy' companies and the neo-nationalist Finns Party. Attempting to hold on to their own values emerged as a strategy to balance on the tightrope between the current logic of productivity and their dreams of a more sustainable version of (capitalist) production, even if these struggles often took place strictly within the realm of individual choice and responsibility and reflected the individualised rationality of postfeminism.

Inka, a digital communication student, was among the many who expressed unease at the idea of working for big corporations primarily interested in maximising profits. As an example, she mentioned tech corporations that extracted profits from creating attention-grabbing properties gluing people ever more tightly to their screens:

They make technology so addictive and try to get people addicted to the products and the services, just so corporations can make money off it. Somehow, the ethics have all disappeared, or they don't think about it all that much anymore. I feel if I was involved and supported all that, it would be like selling my soul. I'd be enabling the issue, endorse the activities. It's not . . . I couldn't sleep at night if I knew that.

Inka expressed the desire to instead use her knowledge to support causes she considered to be important. By considering where she could 'be involved', Inka expressed that

prioritising profit-seeking contradicted her values. She thus encapsulated how working life required balancing ethics with the reality of work requirements:

I have struggled with the fact that you have to sell your soul when you go to work for big corporations and maximise their earnings and income. That's how the world works, but it feels like, you don't want to support that, and with all the talk about the downsides of technology, it makes you not want to work for companies like that. Or you don't want to be a proponent of those trends. Thankfully, I've calmed down now. I figured out I could use my expertise for something good; it doesn't have to be (laughs) that I go work for a giant corporation. Even if they'd pay well and maybe not being in line with my values, it wouldn't be so . . .

As the participants negotiated the productivity imperative, they also questioned productivity for productivity's sake. In so doing, they sought to harness their subjectivities to work they found to be ethically sustainable and in alignment with their convictions, even if these ethics were constrained within the realm of individual choice and were formulated as aspirations for less bad careers in less bad corporations. Many participants perceived the possibilities for political change as limited, but they still often prioritised ethics over material success. The participants' narratives thus complicate postfeminist cultural interpretations of competitive young women as primarily interested in increasing their human capital (cf. McRobbie, 2015).

Conclusion

This article has analysed the lived contradictions of neoliberalism and postfeminism by highlighting the ambivalences in young women's responses to these interpellations. The findings indicate that young women's negotiations of postfeminist imperatives often resemble walking a tightrope between conflicting rationales. The individuality imperative invites them to consider their character to be a key instrument of work and to shape their selves to 'make it' in the CCI. The analysis of the individuality imperative shows that as character and skill merge in the CCI, cultivating dispositions associated with employability demands affective virtuosity as women negotiate conflicting gendered expectations. In addition, the findings demonstrate that young women also challenge the expectation to refashion the self, and they seek to stay true to who they are. Moreover, the productivity imperative is also constantly negotiated, and the responses are equally ambivalent. Young women recognise the interpellation to become productive and comply as they believe that they have to be prolific early in their careers. However, many challenge the requirement of constant productivity and its underpinning logic of economic growth.

According to Skeggs (2014), 'theories of neo-liberalism and governmentality often assume that we have internalized the norms of capitalism and pursue self-interest and future accrual' (p. 10). Other ethnographers have similarly criticised the straightforward theories of neoliberal subjectification and have instead emphasised the complexity, messiness and subversiveness of individual effort (e.g. McKee, 2009; Salmenniemi and Vorona, 2014). Similarly, the aspirational subjectivity portrayed in this article is more nuanced and complex than often assumed in theories emphasising the regulatory power of postfeminist and neoliberal rationalities.

In unravelling young women's responses to the postfeminist aspiration scripts, this research complicates postfeminist understandings of young women as primarily focussed on becoming competitive economic subjects. Instead, the findings show that young women aspiring to CCI careers perceive working life as an area of constant ethical negotiations, including political critiques. The research thus suggests that young women not only embrace but also critique and actively challenge the ideological invitations of postfeminism. Finally, I argue for the continuing importance of studies on lived experience as a way to 'talk back' to the sometimes monolithic theories of neoliberalism and postfeminism.

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