“Stay woke. Make moves” Branding for a feminist future amidst pandemic precarity

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Abstract

This chapter builds on critiques of femvertising (Gill & Elias, 2014), radical consumption and anti-consumerism (Littler, 2009; Binkley & Littler, 2011), cool or woke capitalism (McGuigan, 2009; Winnubst, 2015) and commodity activism (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012) to look at the emergence of several new outspokenly feminist creative enterprises which seek to influence brand strategies and wider culture. Including the ‘female entrepreneur’ podcast *FemGems* and international co-working space for women *The Wing.* The chapter focuses in particular on *Goalgirls*, which styles itself as a team of ‘co-rebelles’ and ‘disruptors’ seeking to challenge sexist advertising, ‘pale-male-stale hierarchies’ and develop ‘experiential marketing, digital campaigns, brand building and activism for a conscious generation’. Set up in 2017 in Berlin, the organisation uses the tagline ‘we are in the business of female empowerment’ to promote a new and different form of creative agency appealing to clients seeking to profit from feminist and ‘woke’ consumers.

In this chapter we look at how the *Goalgirls*’ “co-creagency” has worked across multiple tensions, tensions which have been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. These include conflicts between corporate and activist identities, between individual and collective working, and between slowing down or speeding up ‘productivity culture’. We examine their distinctive ways of working and organising, their campaigns, and their self-presentation in the advertising, branding, and marketing mediascape. How do feminism, activism and anti-capitalist values operate in this contradictory space? How are radical politics being reconfigured in a branded landscape? In exploring the precarious labour, feminism and entrepreneurialism that coexists within *Goalgirls* we identify a novel hybrid – a ‘community-industry’ (O’Neill, 2018) that is shaped both by feminist principles and goals and by the ethos of neoliberal capitalism. In the process this article contributes to the emerging body of critical scholarship on femvertising and corporate ‘wokeness’ as well as to contemporary understandings of cultural and creative organisations.

Keywords
femvertising, woke advertising, feminist creative and cultural enterprise, entrepreneurialism, pandemic precarity

Introduction

> *'We are a female-driven multi-brand. We run a creative agency, a purpose market-place and a co-work/life loft…we curate and we co-create… products and communication for the generation woke.'* [i]

This chapter builds on critiques of femvertising [ii], radical consumption and anti-consumerism [iii] [iv], cool or woke capitalism [v] [vi] and commodity activism [vii] to look at the emergence of several new outspokenly feminist creative enterprises which seek to influence brand strategies and wider culture. These include the 'female entrepreneur' podcast *FemGems* and international co-working space for women *The Wing*. The chapter focuses in particular on *Goalgirls*, which styles itself as a team of 'co-rebelles' and 'disruptors' seeking to challenge sexist advertising, 'pale-male-stale hierarchies' and develop 'experiential marketing, digital campaigns, brand building and activism for a conscious generation'[viii]. Set up in 2017 in Berlin, the organisation uses the tagline 'we are in the business of female empowerment' to promote a new and different form of creative agency: one appealing to clients seeking to profit from feminist and 'woke' consumers.

In this chapter we look at how the *Goalgirls*' 'co-creagency' has worked across multiple tensions which have been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. These include conflicts between corporate and activist identities, between individual and collective working, and between slowing down and speeding up 'productivity culture'. We examine their distinctive ways of working and organising, their campaigns, and their self-presentation in the advertising, branding, and marketing mediascape. How do feminism, activism and anti-capitalist values operate in this contradictory space? How are radical politics being reconfigured in a branded landscape? Considering how such tensions are identified and managed by *Goalgirls* and other enterprises, we argue that the pandemic has intensified existing conflicts between precarious labour, feminism and entrepreneurialism.

The chapter is structured in four sections. First, we introduce notions of radical, cool or 'woke' capitalism, exploring the different ways that feminism's intersection with capitalist enterprise have been understood. Most attention has been paid to the strategic co-option of feminist language and aspirations in consumer culture and branding, but increasingly we are witnessing the emergence of feminist creative enterprises involved in producing new cultural forms, organisational structures and ways of working. It is to the nature of these new and distinctive enterprises that we turn our attention in the second section of the chapter. Part three zooms in on our main case study, *Goalgirls,* arguing for the need to look not only at its products (through which it sells different forms of empowerment branding) but also at its work spaces, organisational forms (which parlay between corporate culture and activism), and its distinctive work cultures which blend feminist defiance with some of the keywords of contemporary positive psychology and the 'self-help society' [ix] such as kindness, self-belief and radical vulnerability. The final substantive section of the chapter looks at how the multiple crises (health, economic and mental wellbeing) associated with the Covid-19 pandemic have impacted *Goagirls* practice and at how they are negotiating pandemic precarity. The chapter's conclusion draws together these themes and outlines the key contributions and the questions they raise.

Locating feminist branding

There is a long history of capitalist enterprises making use of feminism and other social movements for change. In the early twentieth century, for example, products in the suffragette colours of purple, white and green were proudly sold by large metropolitan department stores such as Selfridges which relied upon affluent female customers for their trade. Indeed, this customer base was so important that department stores continued selling the products even when suffragettes smashed their windows in public protest against the patriarchy [x].

From the late 1960s, capitalist enterprises in the Global North selectively tapped into the energies of the social justice movements in order to sell their burgeoning array of products. The 'Post-Fordist' consumer culture which was slowly emerging at that time was characterised by a diversification of product lines increasingly sold on the basis of lifestyle groupings, rather than the forms of 'mass standardisation' offered by Fordism, and innovative ways to target consumers were adopted. In the US, Virginia Slims famously marketed long thin cigarettes to women by offering them as a 'reward' for second-wave feminist struggle with the catchline 'you've come a long way, baby', while in the UK the slogan 'A woman's right to choose' was used to sell everything from sanitary products to holidays [xi].

Through such forms capitalist enterprise has often intersected with feminism and other social movement struggles in flamboyant, yet selective ways. The sheer promotional power of these commercial vehicles has undoubtably helped mainstream ideas about equality, both by glamorising them as exciting, pleasurable and desirable and by *normalising* them – making them part of everyday 'common sense' - through ubiquitous images and messages. At the same time, questions have been asked across a range of disciplines about the limits of the extent of egalitarianism on offer: their character, politics, shape and influence [xii] [xiii].

One answer to such questioning has been to situate the activity of the commercial enterprise in relation to both broader and specific social contexts. Both Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, and Thomas Frank, argued that capitalism renewed itself in the post-Fordist moment by drawing on and commercialising the social justice movements [xiv] [xv]. From the 1990s, forms of neoliberal commercial culture increasingly profited by cathecting themselves to forms of social egalitarianism which were very different to the social mores of 1980s Thatcherite and Reaganite conservatism. The emergence of 'socially liberal neoliberalism', via such figures as Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and Angela Merkel enabled a new commercial vocabulary and relationship to social justice movements. Jim McGuigan, for example, termed the forms of commercial culture associated with Blairism and beyond 'cool capitalism' [xvi]. The expansion of the selling of 'ethical commodities' also burgeoned from the 1980s, taking a myriad of forms[xvii][xviii]. Consumption was increasingly presented as a domain through which it was possible to be 'radical' [xix]

or an ‘agent of change’ [xx] through, for example, the rise of corporate cause-related marketing in the form of pink products being sold ‘to fight breast cancer’ [xxi] or global development initiatives such as ‘The Girl Effect’ [xxii].

There has been a proliferation of terms designed to make sense of this contradictory cultural formation in which corporate endeavours have traded on radical ideas. The notion of ‘incorporation’ was important at an earlier moment (in the 1980s). Like that of ‘recuperation’ it was a means of describing how the ideas of radical social movements are taken up but emptied of their political force and tied back to the status quo. Myra MacDonald critiqued these ideas for their implication that meanings can be fixed once and for all [xxiii]. ‘Commodification’ re-emerged in the 1990s as a critical term for engaging with similar processes. Robert Goldman discussed a variety of ways in which advertisers selectively used feminism to engage with women consumers who were tired of ultra-thin models, perfect beauty and constantly with being told how to improve [xxiv]. The resultant ‘commodity feminism’[xxv] took a wide variety of forms ranging from claiming that brands shared feminist anger, using feminist slogans, or attempting to create a suture between normative femininity and radical feminist politics. As Susan Douglas commented, through these processes, advertising agencies ‘figured out how to make feminism- and anti-feminism–work for them’:

> the appropriation of feminist desires ad feminist rhetoric by Revlon, Lancôme and other major corporations was nothing short of spectacular. Women’s liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires [xxvi].

Since the early 2000s these trends coalesced in what became known as ‘femvertising’, a commercial form of address to women organised around a multiplicity of positive injunctions such as ‘You’re worth it’ and ‘This Girl Can’ and rebellious slogans emphasising power, rights and self-determination ‘My beauty, my say’, ‘Goodbye resolutions, hello empowerment’. One key motif of femvertising has been female self-confidence, figured through imperatives to ‘love your body’, feel beautiful at an age or size, and to be comfortable in your own skin. Via a loose constellation of ‘attitude’, ‘inspiration’ and ‘feeling good’, femvertising messages promote a kind of feminism lite centred on individual consumption and self-love.

Increasingly these commercial messages have also promoted a loose assemblage of ideas about multi-culturalism and diversity, strategically deploying images of minoritized groups (people of color, disabled people, muslims, queer people) in commercial culture to ‘take diversity into account’ only to empty any particular differences of their meaning and social significance [xxvii]. Such campaigns frequently have a ‘postracial’ tenor, in which race is imagined no longer to be a live and active political force in society [xxviii]. These paradigms articulate race as a simplistic formula of visibility/invisibility and inclusion/exclusion within narrow terms of consumer citizenship [xxix] that tend to reinstate whiteness and middle-class status as neutral norms and wealth as a universal, doable aspiration [xxx]. When race is conceived in this flattened, ahistorical way, it is presented

as a feature like any other that can be freely interacted, transacted, alienated [xxxi]. Race becomes simply a form of difference or brandable variation. It is 'aestheticised' [xxxii].

> Post-race re-envisions the scriptures of colour blindness by firmly acknowledging a specified range of racial differences that serve to disavow any vestige of their consequence for anyone--of any race – who can fashion themselves as properly neoliberal subjects [xxxiii].

As Anandi Ramamurthy and Kalpana Wilson [xxxiv] have argued in relation to advertisements, this is demonstrably both a way of responding to activisms and social justice movements around race (and also class, sexuality and disability) while at the same time representing an upgrading of global capitalism in neoliberal forms.

Over the past decade, as the effects of neoliberalism have bitten increasingly harder, savage inequalities became increasingly hard for commercial cultures to ignore. On the one hand there was a visible rise of right- wing nationalisms, virulent misogyny and troubling forms of populism, while at the same time struggles for justice for women, people of colour, and LGBTQ folk became ever more visible. After 2008, the 'post-crash interregnum has produced a new formation which recognises intersectional injustice but promotes neoliberal marketisation as the solution': what Jo Littler calls the 'neoliberal justice narrative' [xxxv]. In this way, social justice struggles came to be resignified within, rather than against, neoliberal capitalism with 'social causes reorient[ing] themselves to assimilate rather than oppose the logics of profits and capitalist gain' [xxxvi]. As Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill argue:

> Nondominant people are recast as visible, neoliberal subjects of *potential* value, their historical experiences of oppression intertwined with an associated generalised sense of positivity, possibility, belief in capitalist futurity, and commitment to self-work. While requiring further intensification of feeling rules that require confidence, 'leaning in', 'hustling', merging associations of diversity with capitalist aims, these now luminous subjects of woke capitalism are mobilised to *add value* to the *affective plausibility* of the new neoliberal meritocracy. They are offered as brand ambassadors not simply for particular corporates but for capitalism itself.[xxxvii]

These trends have become increasingly evident during the multiple crises associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, its associated intensification of inequalities, and the crises of care and mental health it has amplified. It has also been intensified in the wake of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement after the killing of George Floyd by police in May 2020. As organizations have mobilised ideas about the 'benign nature of contemporary capitalism' and 'its potential as a force for the advancement of global equity'[xxxviii], a growing body of scholarship looks critically at corporations scrambling to rebrand themselves as anti-racist, feminist or queer-friendly organisations. Recent work

indicts companies from supermarkets to fashion chains for cynical 'carewashing' [xxxix] or 'wokewashing' [xl], highlighting the racial and classed exclusions that exist despite 'we are all in this together' messages, or the disjuncture between brands' caring or diversity-positive promotional messages and the unsafe and/or exploitative working conditions of their employees. For example, ASOS's self-branding under the slogan 'Unity, Acceptance, Equality' was developed at precisely the time the company was standing accused of 'mistreating its workers with humiliating body searches, the use of security guards in the bathrooms, and punishing "flexi-shifts"' [xli]. Likewise as Jilly Kay and Helen Wood note, fast fashion brand Boohoo's supposedly inspiring messages of hope and togetherness during the pandemic were revealed in mid 2020 to have been produced in dehumanising sweatshops, with workers paid a fraction of the legal minimum wage [xlii].

Such critiques raise questions about the limits of 'woke branding' and of 'radical consumption'. They also point to a neglected topic in studies of 'femvertising'- namely, the issue of production. Given that capitalist commercialism is by definition structurally built on economic inequality, there have been crucial limits to the extent of egalitarianism on offer. It also means there are necessarily questions to be asked about who benefits and loses from these commercial forms -- and requires that we unpick the power dynamics and politics at play. Who produces the feminist or woke messages that dominate the contemporary mediascape? Under what conditions are they produced and to whom are they addressed? To be sure most are undertaken by huge corporate advertising companies such as WPP, Omnicom and Dentsu, or others such as BBH or Grey in a British context. But smaller, more social justice-oriented organizations are increasingly part of this ecology, situated in the broader emergence of 'feminist cultural and creative industries' [xliii] including *Fem Gems*, *The Wing* and *Gal-Dem*. It is to one of these – *Goalgirls* - that we turn our attention next.

‘Go go goalgirls!’

[xliv]

One of our dreams is to tell stories about products, the other is to create products that are stories in themselves. And ultimately: to see those stories have an impact on the way we understand, act and see the world. and each other. [xlv]

Goalgirls is a creative agency specialising in experiential marketing, social media campaigns, and events. Established in Berlin in 2017 by two self-described ‘female founders’ and sisters, Helena and Kaddie Rothe, *Goalgirls* sets itself apart from the wider field of advertising and marketing companies with a particular mission: to tackle this male-dominated industry via their own business venture. Spearheaded by a ‘female-only team’, the *Goalgirls* agency pledges to ‘always make noise on behalf of women’, and ‘defeat sexist marketing and pale-male-stale hierarchies’ through working at the ‘intersection of products, communication and social justice’. *Goalgirls* promote their prowess for ‘nurturing hybrids of culture, politics and social impact’[xlvi]. This, they argue, enables them to influence audiences of ‘woke consumers’ by ‘tapping into’ and promoting messages of social justice through their social media and commercial projects. Through this tactic, *Goalgirls* has worked on a significant portfolio of ‘progressive brands’, including *Armedangels, Bumble*, *Casper, Netflix* and *Mymuesli.*

Not only does *Goalgirls'* social justice-oriented approach afford them powerful reach over 'conscious' audiences, their commitment to 'community' distinguishes them from other players in the advertising field. Describing themselves as the 'sassy spirit of a 90s girl band', *Goalgirls'* collaborative organising and 'women power' are central features of the agency. In 2019 Goalgirls launched what it described as a 'co-creagency': a 'sisterhood' comprising almost 100 'female smart creatives'[xlvii]. In the same year, *Goalgirls* opened *The Womb,* their headquarters in Berlin's central district*.* A coworking space-cum-events venue, *The Womb* promised to act as a hub, bringing together and housing this vast pool of creative women.

In some sense, *Goalgirls'* model borrows from and can be tied to the self-organised and networked feminist groups throughout the 1960s and 1970s within which, collective organising, connecting women, and sharing skills and resources were trademark features [xlviii]. In contrast to the more grassroots and anti-capitalist concerns characterising the Women's Liberation Movement, however, the contemporary incarnation of *Goalgirls* places greater emphasis on the *professiona*l dimensions of collaborative female-relationships, and also on *entrepreneurialism.* In this way, *Goalgirls*' style of 'disrupting the system' is via 'platforming female talent', enhancing their industry employability through pitching workshops, providing informal networking opportunities, as well as offering the chance for women to showcase and receive feedback on their work. The agency combines 'collective' and 'autonomous' working styles, styles in which freelancers are both 'empowered' to work independently, yet 'benefit' from the 'collaborative' nature of the co-creagency. They characterise this as a 'Holacracy' or flat organisation. They stress that 'feeling part of a team' and 'on board' with the organisation are crucial for 'nurturing a creative community'[xlix]. What is striking is how *Goalgirls* seek to create an articulation between feminist values and organisational forms while operating as a commercial organisation working within the sphere of advertising and branding.

Radical politics in a branded landscape

'*Goalgirls:* Here to dismantle archaic structures for equality' [l]

Core themes animating the work of *Goalgirls* are concerns for social impact and 'doing good'[li]. Such impetus, which is regularly promoted across their multiple communication channels, governs the ways in which *Goalgirls* see their work as *more* than just a 'fancy start up idea'[lii]. Rather, *Goalgirls* propose their agency represents 'a pledge for a system change' [liii]. Such activist messages are both integral to and feature heavily throughout the curated content and products *Goalgirls* produce. So much so, they designed the hashtag '#experientialactivism' as a way to communicate the political nature of their advertising style. In exploring further the specific ways *Goalgirls* reconfigure radical politics within a branded landscape, we turn our attention to the 'woke marketplace' section of their website. Here, they sell their own socially conscious, empowering *Goalgirls* merchandise, alongside an assortment of campaigns selling 'products with values, made by people with spines'. Further examples of their woke and radical product lines include facemasks featuring the statements 'patriarchy stinks' and 'racism is in the air'; wellness

products with the taglines ‘emotionally available’ and ‘sometimes you just wanna feel more’[liv]; and, for instance, a collaboration with fashion brand, *Armedangels,* explicitly offering ways to ‘consciously’ spend one’s money whilst acknowledging privilege and inequality:

> So, toxic for me is the belief that we can’t fix the problem anyways, I don’t want to compromise my stance. But that’s not true - the more we pay attention instead of looking away, we’ll spot all the things we can change. It doesn’t matter how privileged I am, or how privileged you are, or any of us here for that matter. As long as our privilege is built on inequality, we are not building a free and safe future for everyone. We all have to be more conscious and more aware about what we buy and understand where it’s from. Maximum profit but with social impact. We’re fighting everything toxic…[lv]

lvi

Here, a language of combatting inequality and privilege on multiple levels is combined with the imperative to make ‘maximum profit’, which is not registered as in the least bit problematic or potentially contradictory. We can also note the strong resonances between Goalgirls activist and ‘wellness’ discourse [lvii] in ‘fighting everything toxic’[lviii].

Other instances of the ways *Goalgirls* blend radical and social-justice discourse with commercial endeavours can be seen through their response to Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. In the wake of this growing activism, *Goalgirls* rapidly released a series of statements in support of BLM and anti-racist movements. These included pledges to ‘amplify people of colour’ through their plat-

form; promises to ‘scan’ the brands they work with to ensure they are diverse and inclusive; donating profits from the *Goalgirls* shop to anti-racism organisations; ‘dedicating’ *Goalgirls* events to the BPoC community with the ‘intention to get educated by them’; as well as promising to review their own structures, educate themselves, and commit to anti-racism training [lix]. It is worth noting here that the organisation itself has remained noticeably white on its Instagram feed since these events.

Within this flurry of accountability announcements, which dominated their social media channels over the summer of 2020, *Goalgirls* placed equal emphasis on the fact that they are always ‘learning’, that they ‘make mistakes’, whilst aspiring ‘to do better’ in their fight for social justice. Afterall, and as they so frequently point out, ‘radical vulnerability’ is at the ‘forefront’ of everything they do as an organization; they aspire to be 'good people’, but are ‘definitely are growing people’[lx]. The phrase ‘radical vulnerabililty’, like ‘radical kindness [lxi] has been deployed by a range of other grassroots activist organisations to indicate empathetic and learning forms of organisational practice; *Goalgirls* put the phrase on a bag that can be bought, turning the ethos into a portable commodity, one that can be used to advertise values, reflected through it’s transparent medium.

The business of female empowerment

“More women at the top means female voices are being heard, and tell the stories that women want to hear.”[lxii]

Platforming, promoting, and providing a whole host of affirmative mantras for women are the driving forces behind *Goalgirls’* commercial work. They are, as they boldly state, ‘in the business of female empowerment’ [lxiii]*.* As an advertising agency run by an all-female team, styled exclusively as ‘marketing by women for women’, *Goalgirls* claims a shared experience and empathy with their target audience. Through this unique expertise, *Goalgirls* have capitalised on ‘empowerment branding’ campaigns which make use of typical femvertising techniques such as ‘boosting’ women’s self-esteem and ‘eradicating’ their insecurities. This is most visible within the plethora of ‘body positivity’ discourse directing *Goalgirls’* campaigns; *Goalgirls* products celebrating the female form, including a clitorial-shaped keyring, a breast-shaped plant pot, a ‘Lactation Latte’ drink; and *Goalgirls* branded stickers featuring the confidence taglines “self-love”, “light each others’ fire” and “hot as fuck” [lxiv]. This notion of ‘empowerment’ through consumption can even be seen in the ways in which *Goalgirls* choose and promote a specific style of workplace fashion. In a 2020 interview in *Refinery 29*, ‘Power Suit up! Strong business women talk about the power of fashion’*,* the *Goalgirls* sisters outline the potential of smart, bold, and ‘powerful’ clothing in helping women “be the most confident versions of themselves” [lxv]. It offers a blend of 1980s business-suited feminist empowerment [lxvi] with contemporary ‘self-love’ and body-positive discourse [lxvii] alongside activist-infused ‘wokeness’ [lxviii].

Embracing ‘empowerment’ and other feminist language is also integral to the ways *Goalgirls* advocates its collaborative work with female freelancers. In launching the

agency, the *Goalgirls* sisters expressed their desire to provide a 'platform that enables and boosts the confidence of female creatives', encouraging them 'to follow their dreams', and to 'work on projects they are passionate about'. In contrast to many other creative agencies, *Goalgirls* demands for 'women to be heard in the creative process', to be 'valued for their talent', thus empowering them to 'make free choices in their work'. Such rhetoric around female self-confidence, self-determination, and overthrowing gendered workplace inequalities is most encapsulated in *Goalgirls'* 2019 song and music video, *A Letter to Mankind (The Empowerment Hyme).* In this four-verse number, *Goalgirls* assertively express feminist aspirations to 'take up more space', 'fight until our voices are being heard' via the confident mantras 'we're at home in our skin' and 'I know what I'm worth'. With this ammunition, in the song's final verse *Goalgirls* suggest radical, collective action to bring down the existing structures of patriarchy:

Break up, blow up, build up, don't stop

We sip from your cup til we level up!

We're dancing on the glass ceiling til it shatters,

Then we glue it back together to protect what really matters.[lxix]

The nature of the action needed is not specified, and perhaps the last sentence of the hyme hints at some of the contradictions implicit in this project (what exactly will be protected by that reconfigured glass ceiling?). Nevertheless, the radicalism of the sentiments expressed here by Goalgirls stand out from the wider corporate landscape in which they operate. In the next awextion, we consider how these imperatives havebeen shaped and pressured by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Pandemic precarity

The far-reaching, devastating and multiple crises evoked by the Covid-19 pandemic are widely acknowledged, as are its wildy uneven effects which excerbate existing inequalities of gender, class and ethnicity [lxx] [lxxi]. Simultaneously, the ongoing emergency has sharply exposed the fragility of the creative and cultural and ecosystem and greatly magnified the precariousness of jobs occupied by creative workers, freelancers, artists and small businesses comprising this industry [lxxii]. For a small enterprise like *Goalgirls,* whose financial security relies almost entirely on physical events, photoshoots, workshops, parties and video projects, repeated lockdowns have placed this organisation in an extremely compromised position regarding its present function and future continuity. This section maps the numerous ways *Goalgirls* have responded to the pandemic.

In charting *Goalgirls'* various and contrasting responses, we can already see how existing tensions between entrepreneurialism, feminism, and precarity are being drawn out and exacerbated in the face of the crisis. These have materialised in pressures to remain digitally 'connected' and support female freelancers throughout the lockdowns, to promote the commercial success of the organisation despite the wider economic emergency, an extended involvement with productivity culture, downsizing the coworking space and introducing new membership fees for their *Goalgirls* community, as well as pressures to raise awareness around wellbeing and mental health throughout these times, as explored in this section.

> #corona we're all in this together - don't panic, spread love, get digital… We need to create these unforgettable moments for the digital realm[lxxiii]

Like the majority of organisations, *Goalgirls* moved their activities online in March 2020. Within these initial moments, *Goalgirls* seemed to be demonstrating a heightened sense of responsibility to remain visible as an enterprise, whilst nurturing the 'power of the internet' to stay connected and bring a sense of 'togetherness' throughout this isolating period. *Goalgirls* also made use of social media technologies such as Instagram Live - the feature that allows users to stream videos and engage with their followers in real time - as a way of fostering a 'shared experience' with networks and followers. The notion of 'collective care' also featured heavily throughout these broadcasts, as well as rhetoric around prioritising kindness, empathy, and recognising the interconnected, global experience of the pandemic:

> if there's one thing we're feeling right now, it's that we're an interconnected species - beyond our borders. it's a global pandemic and the world has shut down to protect each other - let's get behind the mission to develop a global empathy when we stand in solidarity… start caring beyond your fight for toilet paper or pasta #goalgirls [lxxiv]

The vocabulary of caring and togetherness has been extended during the pandemic, and can be articulated in a number of ways, for different ends: whether as humanitarian expression; by lobbyists to pressure governments to socialise forms of welfare provision; or by corporations using 'carewashing' to brand themselves as caring whilst continuing to exploit workers and consumers [lxxv] [lxxvi]. We can see in the quote above that *Goalgirls* offers a fusion of registers: the rallying call for action infused by political rhetoric of solidarity, of moving beyond individualism and borders, and a humanitarian recognition of our global species. At the same time, the forms of action it conducts and recommends at the level of cultural labour are riven with contradictions: between individualised profit-driven entrepreneurialism and sustaining broader, quasi-collective communities of precarious feminised labour.

Similarly, in response to the context of the pandemic, *Goalgirls* organised an online

‘Fortunes Festival’ with the aim of bringing together their ‘Community of Female Creatives’ [lxxvii]. The events within this festival made use of digital platforms including *Zoom*, *Google Hangouts*, and *Houseparty* to allow their networks to ‘create/exchange/debate and read together’, as well as provide advice/ support to small businesses and startups affected by Covid-19 through setting up a ‘digital ideation/ design sprint with our co-rebelles community to come up with solutions together’ [lxxviii]. Further examples of *Goalgirls’* commitment to community were exemplified in the launch of ‘DOMINO RISING’; a self-funded initiative launched on their LinkedIn page which raised money through paypal donations and aimed to financially help female freelancers in Berlin through coronavirus [lxxix]

In setting up and promoting this kind of support fund, *Goalgirls* have flagged the extremely precarious positions of the women in their community. Some of their social media posts also outline the extent of the testing conditions and uncertainty brought about by Covid-19:

> we‘re so exhausted of all these # toxic and #viral apocalypses we have to defeat in 2020”... we thought 2020 is going to be our best year, well it turns out it will be our hardest. as events and campaigns are being put on hold and we hear our creative community of 120 freelancers facing complete uncertainty[lxxx]

Such moments of ‘radical vulnerability’ show how the enterprise has publicly acknowledged the damaging impact the pandemic is having on their work. In a similar vein, the agency spoke about the harmful effects of over-consuming social media within the lockdown, as well as the potential of slowing down and resisting pressures to be productive:

> don‘t let instagram stress you.... some of us can’t handle it all right now. and that’s okay. for the first time in three years we #goalgirls are forced to slow down. and after a first #quarantine week of fighting it, wanting to be even more innovative, learn all the skills and be sporty spice too: we‘re finally accepting that this is not about us… protect your mental health, be aware of what you‘re posting and consuming. slow down, use this time to think about all the things you’re no longer going to do after this is over because you realised you don’t need to [lxxxi]

There is a productive and laudable concern with the mental health of their community on display here, one which also reflects the particular pressures put on female social media users, particularly Instagram [lxxxii]. At the same time, however, *Goalgirls* has also used social media to express their lockdown success: enabled them to reflect, refocus, learn, and ultimately, reimagine the conditions to increase resilience and ‘come out stronger’ post-pandemic. Such a response has materialised in an abundance of positive, motivating language across *Goalgirls’* social media throughout these months, encouraging followers to ‘face the challenge’, ‘think quick on your feet’, acknowledging the fact that things ‘will be tough’ but ‘this too shall pass, it’s all temporary’. This approach

was extended further in how they framed the expansion of their online shop in April 2020 as an 'opportunity to invent, create and grow' to then 'channel their energy into selling products online' [lxxxiii]. This is an almost textbook example of what Angela McRobbie describes as the 'p-i-r' neoliberal gendered dynamic between the perfect, the imperfect and resilience [lxxxiv], which as *Goalgirls* shows continues to be mobilised throughout the pandemic. It is not simply the expression of collective survival, but also the mobilisation of stories of success to 'sell products online' - including themselves - which feature on their feed.

An even more graphic example of *Goalgirls'* extended involvement with pandemic productivity culture can be seen in the promotion and indeed *celebration* of their increased workload in June 2020. *Goalgirls* also announced they were hiring, releasing a series of job opportunities for 'event runners' with 'the right mindset' to work on their multiple and increasing projects throughout summer. The 'right mindset' presumably means both a commitment to a feminist ethos, and an investment in an always-on work culture. In an Instagram Story, the agency boldly stated

> We had such an amazingly productive day.... And after months of worrying we could potentially die, we are now inundated with work. [lxxxv]

As many feminist media scholars have pointed out, the cultural codes of Instagram require the curation of an accessible persona [lxxxvi] and the visible attempt to establish an 'improved self' [lxxxvii]. Self-representation on social media has overwhelmingly worked to position what Alison Hearn terms the branded self as a striving commodity-sign [lxxxviii], in which it is important for women in particular to be seen aspiring upwards for success [lxxxix]. These combined cultures of representation facilitate and enable the gendered celebration of productivity culture.

However, in drawing attention to *Goalgirls'* multiple and complex digital responses, it's important to note the significant changes the crisis has brought to the physical spaces the enterprise **has** occupied since the pandemic. In April 2020, during the peak of the global economic uncertainty, *Goalgirls* decided to pack up and leave their coworking space, *The Womb.* Although the move was framed in an optimistic light - 'everything happens for a reason, it was time to leave'[xc] - this change has undoubtedly impacted the community dimension of *Goalgirls'* distinct organisational culture. What once was a 'female powered creative collective' of 100+ freelancers, *Goalgirls* rapidly decreased when they moved into their new 'Loft Space' in July 2020. Not only did this new location provide limited workplaces, its inaccessible membership fee of €120 per month subsequently excluded the majority of the wider group. Further evidence of the ways in which the *Goalgirls'* community has been hit hard in the wake of the pandemic can be seen in their December 2020 announcement to 'pause' the agency and focus on their individual journeys:

> believe it or not: 2020 was our year. as a team we have achieved more together than any other year: we've hustled through the crisis and managed to push through it. it was exhausting but we learnt a lot. about ourselves. 2020 was our year. that means 2021 will be my year. it will be kaddie's year, helena's year and

> tina's year (and your year) - our year as individuals. we've put our needs and dreams to the sideline in 2020, we have decided we will catch up with our selfs in 2021. that's why we've decided to press 'hold' on our creative agency and focus on our other ventures. ….and don't forget: It's all temporary. Including this break. thank you for all your empowering support! see you soon, xoxo #goalgirls [xci]

Amidst the compulsory expressions of optimism that social media demands of women and the narrative of multiple journeys coming to fruition, the diminishing size of the community and the precarity of the conditions necessary for its successful construction are also palpable.

Conclusion

In this article we have contributed to the emerging body of critical scholarship on femvertising and corporate wokeness, and also to contemporary understandings of cultural and creative organizations. Our focus has been on a new type of creative enterprise that is feminist in its orientations and aims, but that also operates within profit-driven environments with commercial logics. We have argued that organisations such as *Goalgirls* represent a novel hybrid – a 'community-industry' [xcii] that is shaped both by feminist principles and goals and by the ethos of neoliberal capitalism.

It is complicated to read this. On the one hand it is worth noting how successfully *Goalgirls* operates as a 'disruptor' within the broader advertising and PR landscape, particularly in Berlin. Its success is all the more remarkable given the size of the organisation which has only four staff, yet, through its notion of co-creagency also involves a much wider community of feminist 'creatives'. It also clearly occupies an activist and community space with an avowed commitment to openness, inclusivity and creating places and platforms. At the same time, the organisation might readily be seen by some as 'cashing in' on the current visibility of feminist, anti-racist and LGBTQ movements- echoing Sarah Banet-Weiser's discussion of feminist visibility in which ' the T-shirt [or in this case the tote bag or face mask] *is* the politics' [xciii]. While certainly different from the large agencies cynically reinventing their branding along 'woke' lines in order to make money from the trends *de jour*, we have sought in this article to point to some of the tensions within which Goalgirls operate: tensions between a commitment to radical social transformation and an investment in capitalist models; tensions between a critique of 'toxic' productivity cultures and a need to work endlessly to stand out in a crowded market; and tensions between a desire for flat, collective forms of organisation, and the reality of operating in a commercial context characterised by endemic precarity, intensified by the pandemic. We also note various other distinctive features: the growing prominence of wellness and self-care concerns and their overlap with activism; the distinctive aesthetics of Goalgirls' own branding and social media spaces; and the hyperbolic nature of bold and defiant intentions to 'smash the patriarchy' alongside more muted claims to 'maximise the profits'. At the intersection of these trends and contradictions, *Goalgirls* represents one particularly telling site for the production of contemporary 'femvertising'.

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[liii] Ibid.

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