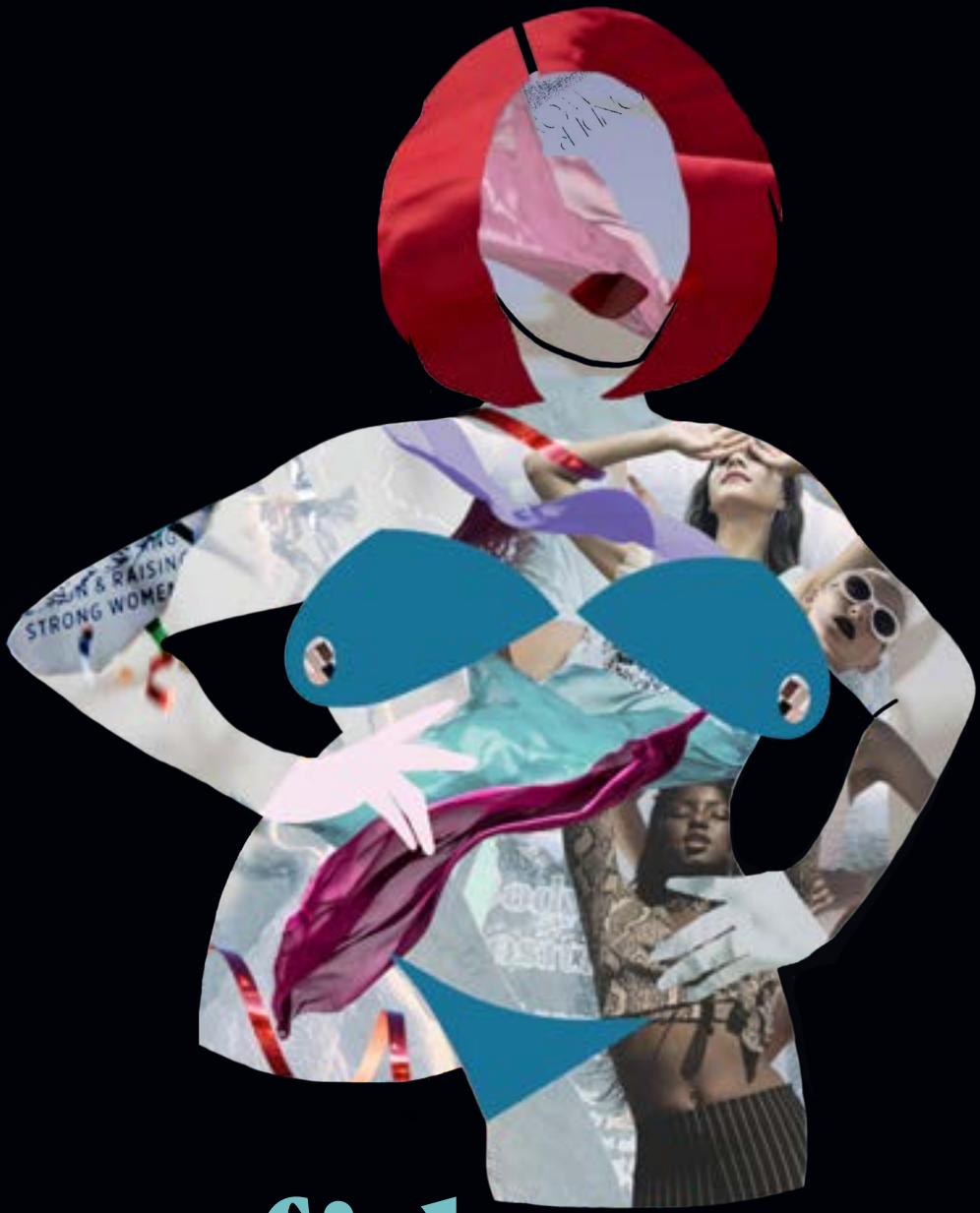

confidence culture

shani orgad +
rosalind gill

confidence culture

shani orgad & rosalind gill

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In memory of Sylvia Chant

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acknowledgments

We first had the idea for this book in 2015, when we created our "confidence basket," in which we started collecting the many examples of confidence messages, exhortations, and programs we kept encountering all around us. The basket quickly started overflowing, not least thanks to conversations with numerous colleagues, friends, and students, who shared with us their own examples, experiences, and ideas. Both the basket and our thinking about the phenomenon we call confidence culture developed out of these interactions. We also greatly benefited from presenting our ideas to different audiences around the world and discussing them with policymakers and journalists. The ideas that developed through all these interactions underscore our belief that the production of knowledge is a collective enterprise. While it would be impossible to individually thank each person, we would like to express our appreciation to the feminist community of which we are a part, which includes critical scholars of all kinds—in media and communications, cultural studies, sociology, psychosocial studies, critical race studies, LGBTQ+, and gender and sexuality studies. The friendship, solidarity, and critical challenges from all these fields have been vital and formative.

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introduction
the confidence imperative

TO BE SELF-CONFIDENT is the imperative of our time. As gender, racial, and class inequalities deepen, women are increasingly called on to *believe in themselves*. This paradox is manifest across a wide range of apparently disparate domains and contexts. At the same time that women are subjected to intensifying appearance pressures and unrealistic body ideals, beauty brands are hiring "confidence ambassadors," women's magazines are promoting a "confidence revolution," and the fashion industry is telling women "confidence is the best thing you can wear." Advertising, notorious for its reliance on and reproduction of sexist, racist, ageist, and ableist stereotypes, is being reinvented as "femvertising," or "woke branding," organized around positive affirmations and confidence commandments.

While pressures to be perfect continue to proliferate and have devastating effects on young people's mental health, more and more female celebrities advocate body positivity and self-love. Examples include chart-topping popular songs such as Demi Lovato's "Confident" and "Sorry Not Sorry"; the self-confidence and self-love hit "Truth Hurts" by the 2020 Grammys' top-nominated artist, Lizzo; and Bomba Estéreo's self-love anthem "Soy Yo,"

which propelled Latina teen Sarai Gonzalez to global fame. Even US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez produced a video with *Vogue* where she shares her beauty secrets and makeup routine, celebrating female self-confidence.[1] "The one foundation of everything," Ocasio-Cortez tells her viewers as she puts the finishing touch to her makeup, is "loving yourself." Meanwhile, a burgeoning number of sites and blogs are promoting body positivity, self-esteem, and confidence, with established hashtags such as #MotivationMonday, #WellnessWednesday, and #SelfLoveSunday. Inspirational mantras and affirmations are endlessly trafficked between girls and women across Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, and other social media such as TikTok and Tumblr, mostly advocating self-belief and positivity.

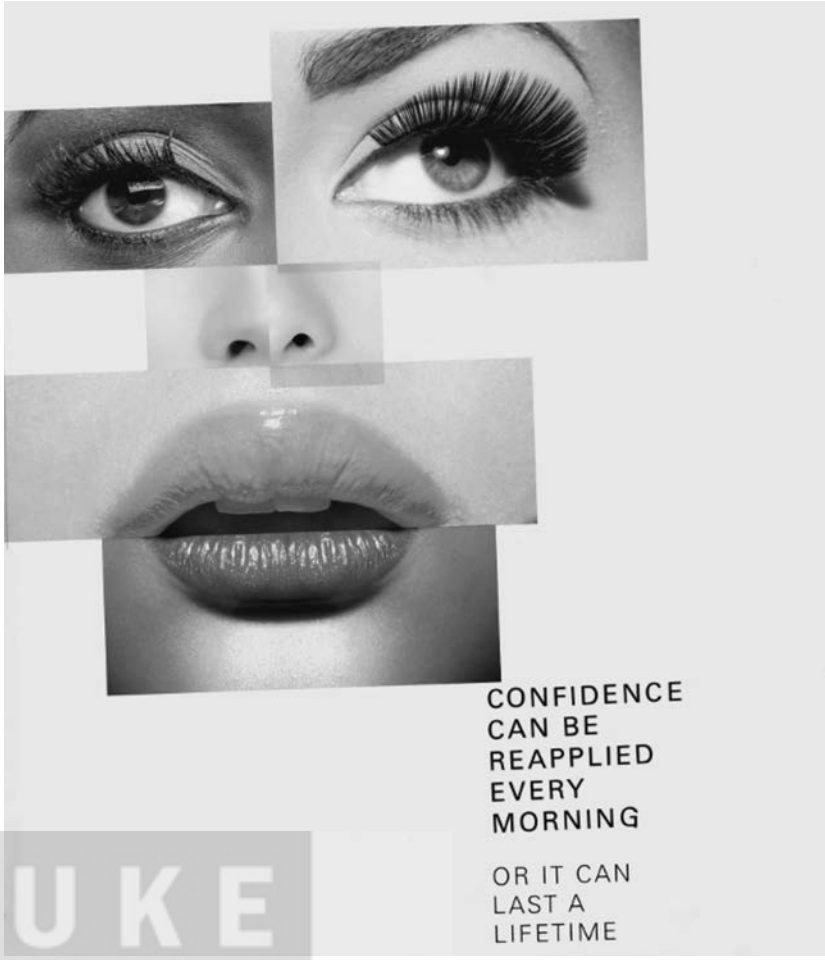
Similarly, at the same time as women suffer profound inequality at work, including significant pay gaps, workplace schemes designed to promote gender equality respond by offering "confidence training" courses for women, and confidence coaches promote workshops and training programs advising women how to appear "virtually confident" when using videoconferencing technologies. As societal policies following the recession and austerity and now COVID-19 hit women hard, topping the best-seller lists are books that place female self-confidence at their argumentative heart: from Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 international best seller *Lean In* to Katty Kay and Claire Shipman's 2014 *The Confidence Code*, Jen Sincero's 2018 *You Are a Badass* to Rachel Hollis's 2019 best seller *Girl, Stop Apologizing*, and thousands of other self-help books promising confidence, self-esteem, and happiness.[2] Mindfulness and self-care apps are promoted as an individualized solution offering confidence-building and anxiety-reduction techniques for women, even as the current mental health crisis is known to impact women and other disadvantaged groups disproportionately.

We began to notice the rise of imperatives to confidence in the early 2010s and wrote several articles about the way that confidence—and related dispositions such as resilience—were taking on a new cultural prominence across many apparently unrelated spheres of life: in the welfare system, in consumer culture, in the workplace, in sex and relationship advice, and even in international development initiatives.[3] We expected that this might be a short-term trend; that confidence might just be "having a moment." But several years later, our culture's obsession with confidence—particularly women's self-confidence—shows no sign of diminishing. Indeed, it seems to be ramping up, partly as a result of the new visibility of popular feminism.[4] Even the military has gotten in on the act: as we write, the British army's 2020 recruitment campaign centers on addressing potential female soldiers with the

message that joining the forces will give them deep and lasting confidence. The campaign's images contrast the superficiality of the pseudoconfidence that "can be reapplied every morning" (like makeup or false eyelashes) with the confidence that comes from being in the military—which "can last a lifetime" (fig. I.1).[5]

These exhortations have become ubiquitous across so many different domains of social and cultural life, and with such striking homogeneity, that they have come to constitute a kind of unquestioned common sense. The self-evident value of confidence—and particularly female self-confidence—has been placed beyond debate, treated as an unexamined cultural good that is

I.1 British army 2020 recruitment campaign "Army confidence lasts a lifetime"



rarely, if ever, interrogated. In this way, a belief in confidence has come to suffuse contemporary culture, like an article of faith.

At the same time, in recent years there has been a seemingly contradictory move, which we call the vulnerability turn.[6] We are witnessing more and more expressions and encouragements for women to express publicly their weaknesses, insecurities, and self-doubt. Indeed, many of the champions of the confidence cult—such as female celebrities Meghan Markle, Serena Williams, Melinda Gates, Michelle Obama, Demi Lovato, and even the "queen" of self-love, Lizzo—have confessed across various media their self-doubts, experience of impostor syndrome, and emotional and physical struggles. Similarly, exhortations to women to be confident frequently encourage them to "embrace" and display their vulnerability. Such messages have gained particular prominence and visibility in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the dramatic reinvigoration of protests for racial justice, most prominently of Black Lives Matter. For example, in March 2020, the self-help guru Brené Brown launched *Unlocking Us*, dubbed by many as the perfect podcast series for our times. Each episode in this series reiterates Brown's mantras of embracing vulnerability and negative emotions. On the professional network LinkedIn, where members commonly promote their polished professional selves, there has been an outpouring of posts by individuals confessing their struggles, burnout, pain, and anxieties in the wake of George Floyd's death and the pandemic. Meanwhile, hashtags such as #Vulnerability, #BeVulnerable, #SelfCompassion, #LettingGo, #RadicalAcceptance, and #VulnerabilityIsStrength are increasingly trafficked on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Tumblr. However, although the focus on vulnerability might seem to challenge some of the characteristics of the confidence imperative, we show that ultimately it reinforces and props up the confidence cult(ure). Vulnerability, we argue, has become almost mandatory and authorizes the individualistic psychologized confidence imperative.

Interrogating Confidence Culture

In this book we take this new common sense to task. Our aim is not to argue "against" confidence in some straightforward way—after all, who could possibly be *against* confidence? Would anyone genuinely want to position themselves against making young women feel more comfortable in their own skins, endowing mothers with self-esteem, or helping older women feel confident in the workplace? Of course not. Instead, we interrogate *the cultural prominence of confidence*: What ideas, discourses, images, and practices make

up the confidence culture? Why has the cult(ure) of confidence emerged and proliferated across so many areas of life at this particular moment? Who does the confidence cult(ure) address, and how are its subjects called upon to act? And crucially, what does the contemporary cultural preoccupation with confidence *do*—both at an individual level for those addressed as needing greater confidence and on a wider social and political scale?

We theorize confidence as both *culture* and *cult*. It is an arena where meanings about women's bodies, psyches, and behavior are produced, circulated, negotiated, and resisted through different discourses, processes, and practices. Concurrently, it is an assemblage of discourses, institutions, and regulatory modes and measures that is systematic, patterned, and directed toward a desired and desirable goal: confidence. The notion of "cult" captures the sense in which confidence has become an unquestioned article of faith while simultaneously spreading across culture. We examine what the confidence cult opens up and closes down, what possibilities for thinking, change, and action it facilitates, and, conversely, what it renders unintelligible.

The book shows that contemporary confidence discourses disproportionately address women, calling on them to recognize themselves as lacking confidence or having a confidence deficit. We use "women"' here in an inclusive sense to include all who identify as such, including trans and gender nonconforming individuals, while noting that the confidence cult(ure) as a technology of self is disproportionately addressed to cisgender women. More than this, self-confidence is frequently mobilized as an explanatory framework wherever there is talk of gender inequality or injustice. Whatever the problems or injustices faced by women or girls, the implied "diagnosis" offered is often the same: she lacks confidence, to which the proffered solution is to promote female self-confidence. Inequality in the workplace? Women need to lean in and become more confident (check). Eating disorders and poor body image? Girls' confidence programs are the solution (check). Parenting problems? Let's make moms feel more confident so they can raise confident kids (check). Sex life in a rut? Well, confidence is "the new sexy"! (check). What is striking is not only the similarity of the discourses, programs, and interventions proposed across diverse domains of social life but also the way in which features of an unequal society are systematically (re)framed by the confidence cult(ure) as individual psychological problems, requiring us to change women, not the world.

The contemporary prominence of female confidence is—at least in part—a result of the force and influence of feminist discourses over several decades. Indeed, confidence can be seen as part of a progressive political project de-

signed to create a more just society. Without feminism, the inequalities to which confidence initiatives are addressed would not even be recognized, nor would efforts be expended on improving women's self-confidence. Yet we contend that the versions of feminism deployed in confidence cult(ure) are troublingly individualistic, turning away from structural inequalities and wider social injustices to accounts that foreground *psychological change* rather than social transformation. As we show in this book, the confidence cult(ure) operates to exculpate the institutions and structures of contemporary life, not holding them to account for unfairness. Instead, it often—implicitly or explicitly—blames women for their difficulties or subordinate positions, frequently through everyday unexamined phrases such as "sometimes you're your own worst enemy" or "your lack of confidence is holding you back." Above all, in locating the cause of social injustice in a confidence deficit, it calls for women to undertake intensive work on the self, from changing the way they look, communicate, and occupy space to psychological work on building a more confident inner life through practices of gratitude, affirmations, self-friending, and more. The confidence cult(ure) becomes part of an "obligated freedom," in which not achieving the required change is framed as moral and psychological failure.[7] In the process, confidence plays a pivotal role in both the neoliberalizing of subjectivity and the remaking of feminism along neoliberal lines.[8]

Postfeminism, Postrace, Postqueer

The confidence cult(ure) is deeply gendered. It is not that men are never addressed by confidence discourses; they are. From dating websites to shows such as *Queer Eye* to advertising campaigns for Viagra, incitements to men to feel more confident are evident. However, the language used to address men is very different. A sponsored ad for male coaching that came up at the top in our Google search for men and confidence exemplifies this. The coach is described as a "No Bullsh*t Confidence Coach."[9] He promises to teach men to "perform at your highest level," "gain total clarity," "become a remarkable leader," "have unstoppable confidence," and "reach social mastery." The "wins" of confidence are framed competitively in greater status and top performance. By contrast, confidence in women is frequently framed in terms of overcoming deeply rooted internal obstacles and correcting a psychological deficit. Even financial confidence may be sold to women as a variant of indulgent "me time" and self-care, as in a magazine article that promises "5 ways to make managing your money an act of self-love."[10] The practices enjoined are

different, too, with a focus on turning inward, keeping a journal, or practicing gratitude rarely seen in confidence messages directed at men.

Perhaps most significantly, confidence programs for women are frequently framed as feminist interventions, positioned as a way of overcoming inequality. Conversely, a more troubling historical root of "confidence" is the "confidence man" and his "confidence games."[11] As Alison Hearn, Jack Bratich, and Sarah Banet-Weiser observe, the mid-nineteenth-century book *The Confidence Man: A Masquerade* and "confidence tricks" provide the blueprint for the type of masculinity championed by contemporary political leaders from Donald Trump to Jair Bolsonaro and which is advocated by pickup artists advising heterosexual men how to seduce women. This masculinity relies on "the investment of trust, the taking of confidence, to achieve its own ends, forming an interpersonal relationship via swindling."[12] Rachel O'Neill's stunning analysis of the seduction "community-industry" shows vividly how the acquisition of dating confidence in these spaces is also shaped by highly competitive homosocial relations among men.[13]

The confidence cult(ure) is entangled in complicated ways with other axes of power and identity, including race, class, age, sexuality, and disability. As we demonstrate throughout the book, confidence imperatives can be seen to recognize and respect differences between and among women—for example, in body confidence campaigns that center on brown skin, curly hair, or fat bodies, which often have a defiant and celebratory tone. Yet at the same time, the specificity of oppressions faced by women of different races, ages, classes, sexual orientations, body sizes, cultural locations, or (dis)abilities is glossed over. The proposed response to social and economic injuries is nearly always exactly the same: to work on increasing one's self-confidence. In this way the confidence cult(ure) opens up the promise of a more intersectional address that is attentive to power and difference, only to close this down, returning us to a "one-size-fits-all" message.

Thus, the confidence cult(ure) is imbricated in, and contributes to, a novel sensibility that is both feminist and postfeminist, postrace, postqueer, and postclass, in which "differences" are recognized only to be emptied of their history, context, and effectivity. These "post" discourses all signal a sense of society having "moved on" from painful historical power relations to a situation in which individual psychological change is required rather than social transformation.

A postfeminist sensibility is one in which feminist ideas are said to have been "taken into account" already, obviating the need for radical social transformation along gender lines.[14] In recent years this has mutated from out-

right repudiation of feminism into something more subtle: a sense of the "obviousness" of the importance of feminism, alongside its reconstruction in purely individual terms that stress choice, empowerment, and competition.[15]

Postrace discourses, too, hold that race is no longer a live and active political force in contemporary culture.[16] They perform crucial work in "neoliberalizing race," shoring up fresh instantiations of structural racisms, and cutting off some subjects from entitlement to subjecthood while authorizing others to wealth and power.[17] In turn, neoliberalism underwrites postracial ideologies, "moving racialization beyond, and away from, the logics of power and phenotype."[18] "Recognizing some racial differences while disavowing others, it confers privilege on some racial subjects (the white liberal, the multicultural American, the fully assimilable Black, the racial entrepreneur)"—and, we might add, the young Black woman striving for greater confidence in order to succeed in a white beauty culture or to fit into corporate environments—"while stigmatizing others."[19] Since 2016, and in particular since the reinvigoration of antiracist activism after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, discourses of race have taken on new forms in consumer culture as brands have sought to harness the cultural energy of this movement for change and to claim "woke" credentials. Though numerous examples of the hollow and cynical appropriation of Black Lives Matter exist (discussed more fully in chapter 1), there are also novel and more positive iterations that have gained widespread praise. For example, Rihanna's brand, Fenty, has been lauded for hiring diverse models and influencers and for contributing to conversations about social justice by centering the young, Black, sexually confident woman.

Similarly, "postqueer" has become a way to talk about the new visibility of lesbians and gay men in the media, but in a way that is not disruptive to heteronormative assumptions and institutions and indeed may work to underwrite them.[20] The privileging of the femme lesbian and the erasure of the butch is one example of this, which also has classed dimensions, as is the hypervisibility of the gay wedding compared with other far less visible aspects of queer identity and cultural practice. The confidence cult(ure) interpellates LGBTQ+ people as potentially having particular problems with confidence. However, rather than exploring how this may be related to a homophobic, biphobic, transphobic society—and the ways this might be transformed—the emphasis is on developing the personal psychological resources to survive. Such injunctions can be deeply moving, as in the extraordinarily powerful letter Irish journalist Lyra McKee, murdered by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 2019, wrote to her fourteen-year-old self. She writes of the cruel ho-

mophobic bullying she received: "It's horrible. They make your life hell, they whisper about you and call you names." But she encourages her teenage self to endure it and be brave—"It will take courage but you will do it"—and to come to realize that "it won't always be like this. It's going to get better."[21] We do not underestimate the importance of this, particularly in the light of the disproportionate mental health issues suffered by LGBTQ+ young people. However, as with the "it gets better" movement, the emphases on developing bravery, resilience, and self-confidence often displace other actions to *change* or *end* the causes of this unhappiness, implying that collective struggle is either unnecessary or impossible.

Finally, a related dynamic is seen in depictions of disability in the confidence cult(ure). These representations often privilege the psychological over material struggles. They suggest that self-doubt and insecurity are more significant challenges than benefit cuts, poverty, or a built environment that systematically favors young, healthy, and nondisabled people. Alison Kafer characterizes this kind of contemporary practice for representing disabled people as "billboard liberation": individualistic, depoliticizing, and often structured through celebrity "superhumans" such as Christopher Reeve, Michael J. Fox, or para-Olympians.[22] Too often confidence cult(ure) messages are culpable in this, presenting disability as an individual obstacle to be overcome through character strengths such as determination, confidence, and resilience and obscuring how different forms of disability are a product of and response to neoliberalism.[23]

Ambivalent Critique

The confidence cult(ure) is powerful and seductive, and we do not exist outside this. As feminist scholars of media and culture and psychosocial studies, we are profoundly aware that power does not just exist "out there" in the world; it also exists "in here"—it shapes our ways of relating to ourselves and others. Inspired by Black, feminist, and postcolonial scholars from Fanon to Said to hooks and Butler, we recognize the *psychic force* of diverse forms of oppression, the terrifying ways in which subordination and social injustice operate not simply through dispossession and discrimination, but by taking up residence in our own heads and hearts. In this respect, it seems clear that patriarchal society can—perhaps inevitably *must*—be seriously damaging to a woman's health, and to nonbinary and genderqueer people too. Indeed, living in a society that is gendered by design and systematically undervalues and attacks women and minorities, it would almost be surprising if there were *not*

an impact on women's sense of confidence, entitlement, and well-being. Yet we remain deeply uncomfortable about the way the confidence cult(ure) is framed as the solution, formulating inequality and injustice in individualistic terms and shifting the blame and responsibility for gender inequality away from institutional and structural injustices to assumed "deficits" in women.

To critique our culture's focus on confidence is to break a powerful contemporary taboo. It is one that operates very often through secrecy and silence, in unspoken feelings and experiences. An expert blog post on the *Psychologies* magazine website is typical in this respect: discussing "improving your social confidence," Dawn Breslin notes that a client was "glamorous" and "sociable" and "doesn't seem shy, but she's absolutely terrified. She's worried that people will find her dull and boring, or that she'll get something wrong."[24] In this way, lack of confidence is presented as a pathology that may be hidden, unspeakable, yet still exerts crippling effects.

Furthermore, the invisibility of what is constructed as a confidence deficit is allied to a prevailing sense of the *work of confidence* never being done.[25] As part of our research for this book we each undertook the "confidence test" provided online by the authors of the best-selling book *The Confidence Code* (which we discuss in chapter 2). We recognize that we were fortunate—and privileged—to score highly on this test, each achieving the grade "confident." Yet in giving us feedback the website immediately warned that this did not mean we could relax. Rather, ongoing vigilance was necessary, since "even those who are fairly confident often experience periods of self-doubt. Or perhaps you feel confident in most areas but still feel more nervous than you would like" in some situations, such as public speaking.[26] Confidence can thus never be understood as assured or complete but is always a work in progress, requiring continual introspection and labor.

It is easy to critique this "sell": like horoscopes or crude marketing tools it always gives you the "right answer"—guess what, you need more confidence! Yet as women (who are daughters, sisters, mothers, teachers, and friends) we are not inured to the affective force of the confidence culture. We have found ourselves moved to tears by accounts like that on the *Psychologies* site, by "love your body" campaigns, by apps that instill a sense of well-being and self-belief, by equality and diversity programs that seem genuinely to celebrate women's achievements. What's more, we are ourselves active—if ambivalent—participants in the confidence cult(ure), for example, repeatedly encouraging our female students to be bold and take up more space in the world, and not to apologize for themselves or preface their remarks with "I'm just" or "I'm no expert."

The cult(ure) of confidence thus resonates powerfully with both our intellectual commitments and our own everyday lives and experiences. Indeed, it is the very simplicity, ubiquity, and seductiveness of the confidence message which makes it so appealing and powerful. But that is also why it deserves critical scrutiny from a feminist perspective, and this is what *Confidence Culture* sets out to contribute.

With our broad argument and our own ambivalent locations in relation to the confidence cult(ure) briefly outlined, the remainder of this introduction is divided into three main sections. In the first we contextualize the emergence of the confidence cult(ure), locating it in relation to the particular neoliberal moment of capitalism in which we exist, specifically: the pervasiveness of therapeutic discourse and the extension of psychological self-help ideas across social and cultural life. In the second section we set out the theoretical resources that inform our account of the confidence cult(ure) and add a brief note about our methods. Drawing on Foucault's notion of technologies of self, we explicate our expansive reading of the confidence culture as a discursive, visual, and affective regime and as social practice. Finally, we close by introducing the structure of the book.

Contextualizing Confidence Culture

Why has the cult(ure) of confidence emerged at this time? What historical and contemporary features have shaped current preoccupations with female self-confidence? In this section we briefly situate its emergence in the context of therapeutic cultures and contemporary models of selfhood, the media's growing emphasis on self-transformation, and neoliberalism's construction of enterprising and "responsibilized" subjects called on to take full responsibility for their lives no matter what constraints they may face.

Therapeutic Cultures

Any account of the rise of the confidence cult must begin with "the psychological century"—the twentieth century—and the therapeutic turn to which today's emphasis on self-worth, self-confidence, and self-esteem belongs. Freud coined the term "psychoanalysis" in 1896, formulating a dramatically new language for conceptualizing the self, which not only helped to make sense of some of the major changes at the time he was writing—shifts in relation to gender, sexuality, and the family—but, more importantly, itself became part of the cultural matrix through which we make sense of our lives,

with notions like repression and denial becoming part of everyday language. The subsequent "triumph" of the "psy complex,"[27] and of psychological discourse, is even more well-established today, furnishing taken-for-granted ideas about the individual's wants, drives, and desires and attempts to know and control them. As Eva Illouz argues, therapeutic notions of the self have been diffused throughout and across Western societies, moving far beyond the consulting room, and have come to shape workplaces, schools, universities, the military, the welfare state, the carceral system, and many other spheres, part of a remaking of capitalism along more therapeutic or emotional lines.[28] Confidence is part of this trend that involves the mainstreaming of psychological discourse for making sense of ourselves and others.

Radical reformulations of the self have occupied new domains and taken distinct forms over the last century. The humanistic psychology articulated in the late 1950s and early 1960s by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers was very different from psychoanalysis, but it further underscored the idea of *working on the self* and augmented the dissemination of therapeutic ideas across social life. This idea, we will demonstrate, clearly informs confidence imperatives and their focus on personal growth and self-fulfillment. Maslow popularized the notion of "self-actualization" to describe an aspired-for state in which individuals who were self-motivating and self-directed work to achieve their fullest life possible. According to Maslow's famous "hierarchy of needs," individuals could only achieve full self-actualization when their other basic needs (such as safety, security, food, and shelter) were met. As Micki McGee argues, it was a notion that "fused religious and psychological discourses. . . . Work on the self—the quest for a path, the invention of a life, or the search for authenticity—is offered as an antidote to the anxiety-provoking uncertainties of a new economic and social order.[29] McGee calls the subject that is produced by these discourses the "belabored self."

One clear precursor of the confidence cult(ure) was the trend for "assertiveness training," which sought to replace passive and aggressive modes of communication with assertive ones. Courses and training programs for women proliferated in the 1980s, often featuring exercises and role plays, such as practicing how to say "no" or to engage in a difficult conversation without apologizing. However, compared with today's confidence culture, assertiveness training back then was more focused on surface behavior and on language rather than remaking the whole self. It was also, arguably, more bounded in certain domains and less widely taken up—e.g., not institutionalized in workplaces or schools or advertising.

These ideas clearly resonated with wider countercultural trends of the time, such as sexual liberation, LGBTQ+ activism, antiracism and civil rights, antiwar, environmental, and animal rights movements, and, of course, feminism. As many scholars have noted, feminism as a political movement helped to foster the conditions of possibility for the dramatic expansion of therapeutic culture and notions of the self.[30] This was effected partly through feminism's reflexive project and its emphasis on personal life as ineluctably political.

The field of positive psychology represents another, more contemporary iteration of therapeutic culture that is central to the confidence cult(ure). Coming to prominence since the late 1990s, positive psychology represents a dramatic shift away from "problems" and psychopathology toward a focus instead on how "positive" psychological states such as happiness, resilience, and confidence can be fostered. It calls forth a self-motivating subject who possesses the ability to "*choose* happiness over unhappiness, success over failure, and even health over illness"—and confidence over insecurity, we might add![31] "Education of the spirit" is proposed as a priority by advocates of positive psychology such as Martin Seligman and Richard Layard.[32] Nationally and globally there are now multiple indexes and governmental programs that measure and promote happiness. Like confidence, happiness is seen as something to be called into being through the efforts of individuals working on themselves, rather than through social interventions concerned with public health, greater social support, or reduction of poverty.

The Rise of Self-Help

The rise of self-help—itself part of therapeutic culture—is also central to understanding how confidence as a gendered ideal has come to such extraordinary prominence today. Yet as we show throughout this book, the confidence cult(ure) is by no means limited to self-help; rather, it materializes across education, workplaces, policy discourses, and media.

Self-help is disproportionately addressed to women, and femininity has long been marked as a "problematic object in need of change."[33] Elaine Showalter and Lisa Appignanesi are among the leading feminist scholars who have eloquently analyzed associations between women's bodies, female sexuality, and madness.[34] Cultural constructions of the figure of Ophelia are one prominent site where this is evident, indexing fragility and inability to control or contain emotions.[35] Such depictions are also profoundly classed, racial-

ized, and heteronormative in ways that privilege whiteness, middle-classness, and heterosexuality.[36] In her erudite analysis in *Self-Help, Inc.*, Micki McGee argues that Helen Gurley Brown and Betty Friedan were key exponents of a kind of early feminist self-help, centering both financial and economic independence.[37] McGee's analysis of their impact suggests such figures as potential precursors of the contemporary importance of confidence in their foregrounding of female autonomy and satisfaction. Yet looking back on the final decades of the twentieth century, McGee contends: "In less than thirty years, 'self-help'—once synonymous with mutual aid—has come to be understood not only as distinct from collective action but actually as its opposite. . . . The self (of self-help) is imagined as increasingly isolated, and 'self-help,' with some exceptions, is represented as a largely individual undertaking."[38] This resonates with many other feminist engagements with self-help critiquing the way in which such literature offers a "re-privatization" of problems and challenges faced by women in an unjust society.[39] As Janice Peck puts it, "therapeutic discourse translates the political into the psychological—problems are personal (or familial) and have no origin or target outside one's own psychic processes."[40]

More recently, Meg Henderson and Anthea Taylor discussed the "neoliberalization" of self-help (considered further below).[41] In this iteration the feminist ideals of the 1980s and 1990s are transformed with even greater individualism and more emphasis on producing subjects "better adjusted to neoliberalism." They chart how a focus on feminist consciousness-raising has "mutated" in postfeminist conduct texts into something less angry and less political.[42] For example, "sisterhood" has morphed into "friendship" and "rage" into "passion." Meanwhile, "equality" has been substituted by "empowerment" (and, as we will show, also by "diversity" and "inclusivity"), and "revolution/liberation" is now figured in terms of "success."[43] A related argument is made by Sarah Riley et al., noting the "postfeminization" of self-help, particularly as it relates to increasingly salient discourses of self-acceptance. This "marries seemingly pro-feminist sentiments of body positivity and self-acceptance with appearance concerns that tie women's value back to their bodies, the consumption of products, and the blurring of economic and psychological language."[44]

Crucially, self-help has not simply proliferated as a form or genre across multiple sites or problems—e.g., work, sex and relationships, dieting, parenting. It has also, paradoxically, refocused on remaking the self across *all spheres of life* with *general* injunctions to positive thinking, resilience, and, of course,

confidence. The neoliberalization of self-help is marked, too, by a particular affective tone in these texts directed at women. Its emphasis is on optimism, boldness, the right mindset, feeling good, developing the right attitude, do(ing) what you love, and so on. Having the right "emotional style" becomes formulated as an imperative: feel this and you can change your life; dream big; take control; make a choice; and "be confident!"[45]

Lifestyle Media and Psychological Transformation

Self-help is no longer confined to books or articles but is a global multimillion-dollar industrial complex that has spread out to include a vast lifestyle media whose aim is to offer up different models of living and to inspire self-transformation. In the context of what some social theorists regard as the "unfixing" or "untethering" of the self in late modern capitalist societies, such media reframe decisions about "how to live" through a dazzling array of individual lifestyle choices. Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, and Mike Rustin argue that the fantasies of success, individualization of identity, and endless refashioning of the self seen in lifestyle media are "soft forms of power" that are every bit as "effective in changing social attitudes" as more obvious hard forms of control or governance.[46] Katherine Sender locates lifestyle media as guides in navigating the difficulties and possibilities of a world in which everything seems to rest on individual "choice."[47] Lifestyle media center on exhortations to remodel the self and interior life—not simply to become thinner, be better groomed, or have more successful dates, but to make over one's psychic life or subjectivity to become a "better" version of oneself, that is, confident, happier, more resilient.

Aiding in this process, Sam Binkley argues, is a new stratum of "everyday experts of subjectivity"—diet experts, confidence trainers, life coaches, therapists, wellness mentors, influencers, and mindfulness gurus—who "mediate becoming," bringing the psychologically upgraded subject into being.[48] Indeed, perhaps the most significant force of lifestyle media is the way it systematically refigures individuals as *self-governing subjects*, "as the agents of their destinies, who achieve goals of health, happiness, productivity, security and wellbeing through their individual choices and self-care practices."[49] Working on one's own self-confidence is, for women, precisely one of these self-care practices, and a means by which they are made responsible for their own success or failure—understood not through accounts of structural inequality or social injustice but in personal, psychological terms.

Finally, the emergence of the confidence cult(ure) is intrinsically connected to the enduring and pervasive impact of neoliberalism as an organizing force in contemporary Western societies. Neoliberalism is classically understood as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade."[50] It is regarded as a distinctive phase of contemporary capitalism, marked by privatization, deregulation, and the "small state," alongside a profound shift of responsibility onto individuals. But as well as an economic and political program, it is a social and cultural project, an *everyday sensibility* and rationality underpinned by ideas of choice, entrepreneurialism, competition, and meritocracy. Neoliberalism has insinuated itself into "the nooks and crannies of everyday life" to become a hegemonic, quotidian sensibility.[51]

Under neoliberalism, a market ethic works to reconstitute subjectivities, calling into being subjects who are self-motivating and entrepreneurial, who will make sense of their lives through discourses of freedom, responsibility, and choice—no matter how constrained the latter may be (e.g., by poverty or racism).[52] Conducting life through an entrepreneurial spirit, the neoliberal self is said to be hailed by rules that emphasize ambition, calculation, competition, self-optimization, and personal responsibility.

While we concur with this emphasis on neoliberalism's operation across social life—what Wendy Brown calls its "stealth revolution" across the entire demos—we depart from accounts that regard the self called forth by neoliberalism as *purely* rational and calculating.[53] To this we want to add an understanding of its dynamics at *an affective or emotional level*, the extent to which neoliberalism incites particular qualities, dispositions, and feelings—among them confidence. Barbara Cruikshank's work on the "state of esteem" is crucial in this respect, arguing that the cultural prominence of self-esteem is "not an escape from politics but a sign that the political has been reconstructed at the level of the self." It is, she asserts, "a practical technology for the production of particular kinds of selves."[54] Christina Scharff vividly shows this in her study of how neoliberal features of the "entrepreneurial subjectivity," such as embracing risks, resilience, and positive thinking, permeated the hearts and minds of the female creative workers she interviewed as they recounted their attempts to succeed in a competitive field.[55] Akane Kanai discerns similar trends in her analysis of young women's social media repre-

sentations, in which difficulties are presented through "humorous, upbeat quips" and in which pain and struggle must be rendered into "safe, funny, 'girl-friendly' anecdotes."[56]

These and other studies demonstrate how "being able to use psychological language to reflect on the self is a core requirement of neoliberal subjectivity."[57] Moreover, a focus on "positive mental attitude" is increasingly central to contemporary culture. As Barbara Ehrenreich has argued, "positive thinking . . . has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy."[58] "Happiness" and "wellness" are related imperatives, underpinned by entire industries, bodies of expertise, and cultural programs.[59]

More generally there is a "turn to character" in neoliberal societies, which centers qualities such as passion, "grit," confidence, and resilience.[60] They serve as contemporary regulatory ideals that have flourished in the context of austerity and worsening inequality.[61] For example, Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn demonstrate how these dispositions are used in the British welfare system, enacting a new form of "deserving poor" who are compelled to be "positive" in order to get payments.[62] Discourses of resilience call on people to be adaptable and positive, "bounce back" from adversity, and embrace a mindset in which negative experiences must be reframed in upbeat terms. Incitements to resilience have been shown to be gendered and classed, seen in many areas of public policy such as health and welfare, and also adapted in schools and workplaces as a means to train people to cope with the stress, bullying, overwork, and precariousness that are endemic features of contemporary social life.[63]

If neoliberal culture requires subjects who work on their characters and psychic dispositions, then it also works by attempting to shape what and how people are enabled to *feel*—and how their emotional states should be displayed. This is part of a wider entanglement between neoliberal capitalism and feelings that Eva Illouz has dubbed "emotional capitalism."[64] We contend that neoliberalism not only shapes culture, conduct, and psychic life but also produces a distinctive "structure of feeling" in which women are called on to disavow a whole range of experiences and emotions—including insecurity, neediness, anger, and complaint—while displaying others such as "positive mental attitude" or "inspiration."[65] Throughout this book, we demonstrate how confidence has become part of the cultural, discursive, and affective scaffolding of neoliberalism.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach: Confidence as a Technology of Self

How, then, should we make sense of the new cultural prominence accorded to confidence? What theoretical resources are useful for exploring and examining it? The confidence cult(ure) could be considered in various ways: a "turn" to confidence, a confidence "movement," a new zeitgeist, or "confidence chic."[66] We consider it as a *cultural formation* or *dispositif*—a set of knowledges, apparatuses, and regulatory modes that systematically call forth a novel *technology of self*. Foucault developed the notion of technology of self in his later work as a way to overcome what he saw as the limitations of his own theorizing of power and to move beyond the notion of individuals as docile, passive, and disciplined subjects.[67] Technology of self became, for Foucault, a key term for fashioning an understanding of the link between wider discourses and regimes of truth and the creativity and agency of individual subjects: "Technologies of self . . . permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality."[68]

For us the notion is valuable for four reasons. First, it offers a way to think about the relation between culture and subjectivity that is not reductive, deterministic, or conspiratorial but nevertheless insists on holding together work on the self with a wider appreciation of power. As Foucault puts it, technologies of self are "the way in which the subject constitutes himself [*sic*] in an active fashion, by the practices of the self, [but] these practices are nevertheless *not something that the individual invents by himself* [*sic*]."[69] They are not random, then, nor individually or idiosyncratically produced, but are historically and culturally specific—as we will show in relation to the cult(ure) of confidence.

Second, this notion highlights the way in which the confidence cult(ure) relies on a self that is apparently independent of—or ontologically separate from—itself.[70] That is, a self is posited who is reflexive, somehow able to reflect upon and act upon itself, and whose responsibility—indeed ethical obligation—this task of self-reflection is. The notion allows us to access the reflexiveness of the confidence cult, then, to see how it requires a self-monitoring individual attuned to practicing and increasing their confidence.

Third, this later work by Foucault opened up a space for theorizing agency (not just domination), as well as for considering "the psychic life of power."[71] As such, it refuses a view that would regard the confidence cult(ure) as mere

"false consciousness." While we seek to engage critically with the contemporary proliferation and force of confidence messages, our critique is not based on a *dismissal* of those advocating female self-confidence, nor of those many millions to whom the confidence cult(ure) is addressed. On the contrary, we argue that the confidence cult(ure) has taken hold so powerfully precisely *because* of its ability to connect meaningfully with many women's lived experiences—troubled relationships with their bodies, struggles in parenting, difficult experiences in the workplace, and so on. Our critique, then, proposes not to "take down" confidence as an idea or ideal but rather to look at what the confidence cult *does*: how it operates performatively, what it brings into being and renders visible, and what it obscures or makes unintelligible.

The fourth valuable feature of "technology of self" is the way that it allows us to examine how the confidence cult "sensitizes" those to whom its exhortations are addressed, making its individualistic and psychological prescriptions appear self-evident rather than one particular way of framing the issues.

There have been numerous productive feminist attempts to use Foucault's focus on technologies of selfhood—among them the work of Susan Bordo, Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, Angela McRobbie, Hilary Radner, Adrienne Evans, and Sarah Riley—and our work contributes to this broader theoretical project.[72] We see the confidence cult(ure) as a gendered technology of self, which not only is primarily addressed to women but also acts on gender relations, reframing critical accounts of gender power in individual and psychological terms.

In our feminist critique of the confidence cult(ure) we want to push at and develop Foucault's term "technology of self" in several key ways. Foucault's primary interest was in the discursive—conceived broadly. To be sure, the cult(ure) of confidence works through and mobilizes a range of different yet patterned discourses. Indeed, time and again while researching this book, we have been struck not simply by the proliferation of different areas of life that the confidence cult addresses but also by the way in which the same ideas and even the same words and phrases would recur over and over in apparently distinct domains and genres, from advertising to policy documents to self-help. Yet confidence as a technology of self also materializes as a visual regime, in affect and feeling rules, and in a huge variety of different practices—ranging from advice on how to generate confidence by holding your body in a particular way to quizzes to measure your "confidence quotient." In the next section we look briefly at each realm in turn to offer a rich and expansive understanding of confidence as a gendered technology of self.

Confidence Culture as a Visual Regime

Over the past two decades, and particularly in the last few years, a relatively stable set of images has been developed to convey messages about female autonomy, power, and capacity. As many scholars have noted, this was partly demanded by significant changes in demographics (e.g., more women working outside the household than ever before), in combination with media producers' recognition of the power of feminism. In our examination of the confidence cult(ure) as a visual regime, we draw on critics who highlight how the feminist ideas and specifically images are appropriated and incorporated, offered back to women in depoliticized ways.

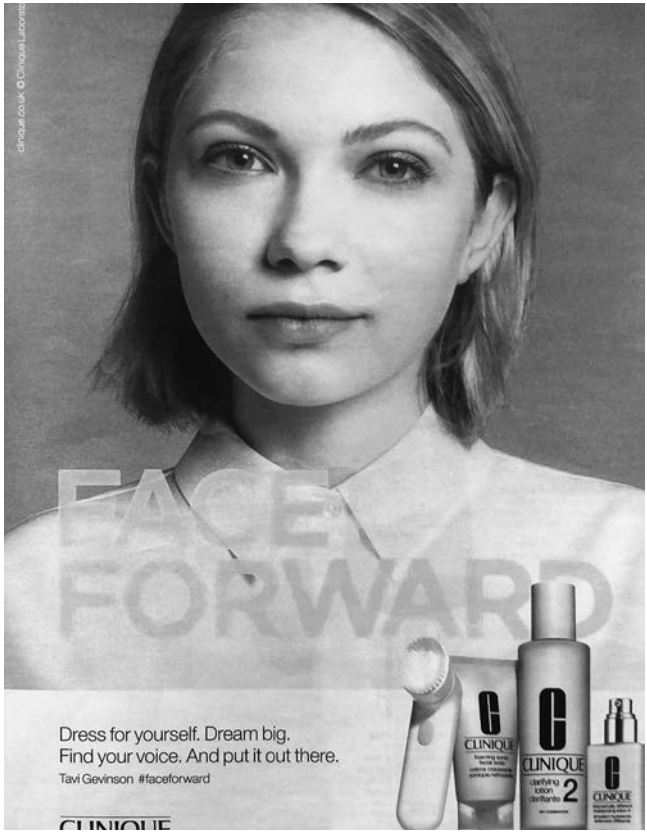
Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon Smith's work in the early 1990s examined how advertisers sought to distill a kind of "commodity feminism," in which they could harness the power and excitement of feminism as a movement while emptying it of its radical politics.[73] This analysis is significant in its attempt to analyze how advertisers sought to present feminism as *visual style* built around a slim, toned body, an assertive posture, the holding of the gaze, and particular clothes (e.g., a tailored business suit, sharp bag, and high heels) as indicators of female self-confidence, sutured with more conventional markers of femininity to ward off the potential threats posed by this new construction. A few years later Susan Douglas commented that advertising agencies have "figured out how to make feminism—and anti-feminism—work for them. . . . the appropriation of feminist desires and 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."[74]

More recently, digital visual archives such as the Lean In Collection—a collaboration between Sheryl Sandberg's LeanIn.org and Getty Images that was launched in 2014—have become key loci of images of "confident" women and a vehicle for their dissemination. Claiming to show "real women doing real things," the Lean In Collection seeks to confront the media industry's "image gender gap"—notably the ubiquity of clichéd and stereotypical images of women and men across visual culture—and intervene in the visual landscape to promote gender equality, on the basis that, as Sandberg puts it, "you can't be what you can't see."[75] The collection has been criticized for its lack of diversity (although it is significantly more diverse in terms of age, race, and body type than Getty Images) and its foregrounding of white, privileged women whose "empowerment is heavily premised upon ideals of corporate

success."[76] It replaces an earlier genre of images of women balancing motherhood and work at immense cost—dubbed by Jessica Valenti "Sad White Babies with Mean Feminist Mommies"—with a new romanticized stereotype in which happy and high-achieving women work productively while beatific infants gurgle in playpens next to their desks.[77] Thus, though the Lean In Collection offers novel images of confident and successful women, as Caroline West notes, it "underscores the internalization of neoliberal rationality" via a fantasy of ease and privilege and without any challenge to capitalism—a theme we develop in the following chapters.[78]

Reevaluating Goffman's *Gender Advertisements*, Kirsten Kohrs and Rosalind Gill identify a style they dub "confident appearing," evident in an analysis of a corpus of two hundred advertisements in upmarket women's magazines.[79] The visual elements of this style involve several repeated features: head held high, face turned forward, eyes meeting the gaze of the viewer and looking directly back at them. When women are pictured alone, smiling is rare, and sometimes the gaze has an almost defiant aspect. These visual motifs are anchored by the linguistic elements, which highlight female independence, empowerment, self-belief, and entitlement. A good example is Clinique's 2020 advertisement for skincare products. Using the face of US feminist Tavi Gevinson, known for founding the online feminist magazine *Rookie* while a teenager, the ad declares "FACE FORWARD" (fig. I.2). Facing forward, like facing the world, is a synonym for confidence. Gevinson's visage, made up in a naturalistic style, with her hair swept away from her face and tucked behind her ears, exemplifies this idea: her "bare" face looks straight at us with a neutral expression. The confidence message is underscored by the written text, which declares: "Dress for yourself. Dream big. Find your voice. And put it out there."

Other tropes in the visual construction of "confident appearing" involve control and movement, for example, with the figure of the woman striding confidently forward through an urban landscape, echoing the image of the "woman with the flying hair" that dominated the visual landscape in the 1980s. As Hochschild writes, "She has that working-mother look as she strides forward, briefcase in one hand, smiling child in the other. Literally and figuratively, she is moving ahead. . . . She is confident, active, 'liberated.'"[80] In such representations the stride is typically exaggerated to highlight a sense of a forward-moving woman.[81]



I.2 Clinique ad "Face Forward"

Confidence as an Affective Regime

The confidence cult(ure) is also an *affective technology of self*: it operates in and through emotions, feelings, and desires. Injunctions to female self-confidence are not simply exhortations to speak differently or behave differently; they are calls to *feel differently about oneself*, even though this is regarded as the hardest shift to make, and women are often exhorted, in the meantime, to *act*—or "fake it till you make it." The idea is that repeated *performance* of external confidence markers such as assertive posture or speech will, eventually, generate the longed-for *internal* shift—something that is "explained" via various loosely formulated means such as "hormones" or neurotransmitters, for example, testosterone, dopamine, or serotonin (frequently referred to in dumbed-down language as "the feel-good hormone" or "the cuddle chemical").

Confidence messages are attempts to produce particular feelings or dispositions—such as boldness, pride, joy, or self-love. As we show throughout this book, the confidence cult exhorts women to "love your body," to believe one is worthy of being loved, to feel more entitled and take up more space in the workplace, to experience pride as a mother and to instill similar pride in one's children, and so much else. We demonstrate that much of the force of the confidence cult derives from its attempts to inculcate and shape our emotional lives, through what Arlie Hochschild dubbed "feeling rules."[82] Through this analysis of the confidence cult(ure) as a feeling-producing technology, our work makes a contribution to thinking about the current conjuncture not simply in economic or social or political terms but also in affective terms.

The last two decades have seen an extraordinary "turn to affect" across contemporary theory, as scholars have sought to understand the way that emotions such as rage, envy, and melancholia shape social life.[83] A growing body of research interrogates public moods and atmospheres that are understood as intersubjective and widely shared, theorizing affect as social or public.[84] Sara Ahmed's work asks what emotions *do*, exploring how they "circulate between bodies," sticking to some and passing over others.[85] In turn, Imogen Tyler analyzes how processes of "social abjection" operate by mobilizing affects such as anger or disgust toward particular groups.[86] And on a broader scale still, Kirsten Forkert, John Clarke, and Larry Grossberg read contemporary culture through the lenses of "public mood," loss, and affective landscape.[87]

While the confidence cult(ure) might be illuminated by any and all of these perspectives, the perspective we have found most compelling is Margaret Wetherell's affective-discursive approach.[88] Frustrated by the often vague articulations of affect theory with their emphasis on sensations and intensities that are said to precede or exist outside of the social, Wetherell has offered a thoroughly social rereading of affect. It rejects the idea that affect is a "pre-personal and extra-discursive force hitting and shaping bodies" and argues that affect is social, patterned, and implicated in power relations.[89] Importantly, this makes it amenable to rigorous analysis and empirical study—through research that examines affects and discourses together, using the notion of affective-discursive practices.[90]

Confidence Culture as Practice

As we have argued, confidence is a technology of self that operates discursively, visually, and affectively. Confidence ideals and imperatives exist in language, they can be seen in distinctive visual constructions, and they also

materialize as exhortations to feel differently. More than this, it is clear that the confidence cult designs and offers a huge variety of *practices* for generating self-worth and self-esteem. It is organized through a multiplicity of techniques, knowledges, and affective apparatuses designed to measure, assess, market, inspire, and manufacture self-confidence. As we show throughout this book, these practices include different ways of speaking, of writing, of dressing, of holding one's body. They are called forth in physical exercises, in affirmations of self-worth, in injunctions to be one's own friend, in cautions against perfectionism, in gratitude diaries, and in self-coaching. The confidence cult has entered the marketplace, the workplace, the home, the bedroom; it is located in our most intimate relations with ourselves and others, and it is found at the widest level of global development. And as it traverses sites, a range of experts, programs, and discourses are invested in establishing women's lack of confidence as the fundamental obstacle to women's success, achievement, and happiness and in promoting the acquisition or development of self-confidence as its ultimate solution.

The theory of media practice seems pertinent in this context, for many of the confidence practices that women are called on to engage in are oriented around and toward media: from online and print quizzes and forms of self-evaluation to self-tracking technologies, photographic filters, and confidence apps.[91] The ostensible aim of these media practices is to induce and cultivate in women confidence as the prime practice, what Ann Swidler would call the practice at the top of the hierarchy that anchors all other practices.[92] As we will show, the confidence culture is geared toward manufacturing confidence in how women act in the world across all domains, in the myriad of the practices in their lives. And while in this book we do not investigate whether and how individuals take up the confidence practices on offer, we use the concept of practice to underscore the potential force of the confidence culture in shaping what women *do*.

A Brief Note on Methods

Finally, we want to make a brief note about our methods and the scope of this study. As indicated already, our geographical focus is predominantly on the United Kingdom and United States, with other examples drawn from Australia, New Zealand, and various parts of mainland Europe. Chapter 5 is the exception here in being attentive to the "export" of confidence discourses to the global South. Yet we eschew a universalizing discourse and locate the contemporary preoccupation with confidence primarily as a Northern and

Western phenomenon. Our temporal focus, in turn, is, as much as possible, on the contemporary. Notwithstanding that, as we have demonstrated already in this introduction, the confidence cult(ure) did not emerge out of nowhere but has clear historical roots and antecedents. As academics we have been tracking this over several years, and our examples include early iterations of confidence messages—such as Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, which was launched in 2004—alongside case studies that we encountered as the book was going to press, during a global pandemic, at a time of revitalized antiracist activism, and in an election year in the US.

Cultural analysis is a "craft skill" and it is not always easy to lay bare with precision the manner in which analyses proceeded—though such transparency and clarity is, in our view, a laudable aim. Broadly speaking, our approach to analyzing examples is rooted both in a media and cultural studies tradition and in a particular attentiveness to discourse. As we have indicated above, we do not regard discourse purely in terms of language but as inhering in images, affective states, and practices, which we examine in the book. Our work has also been influenced by the ethnographic focus on "following the object"—in this case, constructions of self-confidence.[93] We have attempted to track confidence imperatives across multiple sites, topics, and practices—reading, analyzing, and experiencing them, keeping careful records, and attempting to practice the reflexiveness that is a hallmark of feminist research.

We have amassed a significant "confidence archive" during research for this book. Yet, as scholars with rigorous methodological training, we have been (appropriately) wary of "confirmation bias," that is, of seeking out only examples that would support our argument about the force of the confidence cult(ure). As discourse analysts have argued, there are many ways for qualitative researchers to ensure the reliability and validity of their readings, including examining participants' understandings, using triangulation, and, of course, studying reception and readings of the phenomenon under study.[94] These have informed our approach, though a reception study was beyond the scope of this project. In addition, a crucial strategy for ensuring rigor is "deviant case analysis," in which researchers actively seek out cases that do not seem to fit the pattern being identified. One example of this is the attention that we now give to vulnerability. The relatively recent visibility of vulnerability as a cultural phenomenon at first seemed to challenge what we understood to be a cultural valorization of confidence.[95] Rather than ignore this—or, worse, seek to suppress it—we turned our attention to manifestations of the "vulnerable heroine" and, as a result, came to see vulnerability

not as a repudiation of the confidence cult but as something intimately and dynamically entangled with it. This is an example of how attentiveness to principled scholarship materially contributed new insights to the research.

Structure of the Book

The book is structured thematically, tracking the iterations of the confidence cult(ure) across five distinct spheres: body confidence, workplace, relationships, motherhood, and international development. Each chapter focuses on one of the five domains, highlighting different features of contemporary imperatives to confidence.

In chapter 1, we examine the proliferation of body confidence messages targeted at women. We argue that body confidence has come to prominence as an issue through a multiplicity of different actors: activists, NGOs, national governments and transnational organizations, and—perhaps most visibly—the "love your body" (LYB) messages of contemporary advertising for brands like Dove, Always, and Gillette. Taking advertising as our main case study, we argue that increasingly ubiquitous commercial LYB messages underscore the idea that low self-esteem and poor body image are essentially trivial issues for which women are themselves responsible. These messages suggest that such issues can be quickly overcome through injections of positive thinking (and purchase of the right products). We show how some body confidence advertising expands the range of representations of diverse women (in terms of body size, race, religion, disability, and cis/transgender) yet at the same time hollows out these differences as if they were merely aesthetic. We demonstrate that while body confidence messages often have a warm and affirmative glow, they work to instill a new layer of discipline for women—a discipline that involves making over subjectivity to become an upgraded confident subject.

Chapter 2 moves on to look at confidence discourses in the workplace. We focus on two key sites where exhortations to confidence are made repeatedly to women in the context of work: advice literature on building and managing a career and other popular discussions about women and work. Specifically, we look at best sellers that appeared in the Anglo-American cultural landscape during the last ten years, including *Lean In* (2013) and *The Confidence Code* (2014), *Girl, Stop Apologizing* (2019), *A Good Time to Be a Girl* (2018), and *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience and Finding Joy* (2019), as well as at public appearances of successful businesswomen, workplace advice, work-related TED talks, and career-related apps. We show how these cultural texts promote ideas about women's obligation to work on themselves to overcome

their confidence deficit and how the turn to confidence has been instrumental in putting workplace gender inequality on the agenda. At the same time, we demonstrate how the confidence culture calls on women to turn inward to tackle their "inner" obstacles and turns away from critiques of work cultures and the broader structures which produce women's self-doubt and stand in the way of their progress and success in the workplace.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to confidence in relationships, showing how the confidence cult is shaping contemporary advice to women. We examine a range of different media, including magazines, smartphone apps, and best-selling books, demonstrating that confidence is presented as an essential quality, without which dating and intimacy will inevitably founder. We track a shift in sex and relationship guides aimed at heterosexual women: from "pleasing your man" to "being confident for yourself." We also examine the increasing attention being paid to one's own intimate relationship with oneself, exploring how confidence is entangled in broader incitements to self-belief and self-love—alongside seemingly paradoxical injunctions to embrace vulnerability and failure and to defy perfectionism.

In chapter 4 we explore how the confidence cult(ure) is refiguring motherhood in the context of discourses of intensive parenting, alongside increasing insecurity and precarity. Through attention to best-selling books, advertising, policy documents and campaigns, and social media sites, we interrogate the cultural landscape of confident mothering, showing how it operates with a "double whammy": exhorting women to be confident mothers while also calling on them to instill confidence and resilience in their children, particularly daughters.

Most of the book examines examples from the US, UK, Europe, and Australasia. In chapter 5, however, we discuss how the confidence cult(ure) is spreading out transnationally and, in particular, how confidence is increasingly mobilized in discourses about humanitarianism and international development. Tracing shifts in contemporary policies and practices of international aid, we demonstrate that a focus on girls' and young women's confidence has become central to what some call the "posthumanitarian" environment, marked by a shift from public to private actors and the increasing visibility of celebrities in "philanthrocapitalism." We consider how brands and NGOs promote female self-confidence as a unifying strategy that apparently benefits and empowers girls and women in the global South, while also endowing their Northern "sisters" with pride and entrepreneurial skills. This obscures obdurate inequalities and power relations steeped in colonialism and economic exploitation.

The conclusion draws together the threads of our argument across these multiple topics, domains, and cultural forms. We show that across disparate aspects of life—the body, the workplace, motherhood and other intimate relationships, and even international development initiatives, confidence has come to be a coherent *dispositif*—built on technologies of self that require women to work on and remodel their subjectivity and experience. This is materialized through remarkably similar practices of introspection, vigilance, and labor. We argue that the confidence cult(ure) operates to do nothing less than transform women's sense of self in a manner that exculpates social structures and institutions from responsibility for gender injustice, laying it squarely at women's door. In the process, we suggest, the confidence cult(ure) is implicated in making over feminism along individualistic and neoliberal lines. But how could this be otherwise? How might it be possible to rethink confidence as a collective project—not an individual woman's obligation? Or even to move beyond confidence? In concluding the book, we explore some alternative formulations and the ways that they might open up, rather than close down, possibilities to work toward a more just world, beyond (if not completely outside) confidence.

notes

Introduction

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