

The Tyranny of the Ideal Self: Neoliberal Subjectivation, Emotional Distress, and Forms of Resistance in Young Women

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Abstract

This article explores how young women experience emotional self-demand and anxiety as effects of neoliberal subjectivation in contemporary Spain. Our inquiry is grounded in critical feminist psychology and a reflexive qualitative epistemology, foregrounding situated knowledge, power relations, and the researcher's positionality. We analyze twelve in-depth interviews with urban women aged 22 to 28 using reflexive thematic analysis. The study was conducted in the post-pandemic period, amid high youth unemployment and growing affective precarity. Findings reveal four key themes: the internalization of an emotionally competent and high-performing “ideal self”; the silencing of emotional discomfort, often perceived as a personal failure; the pressure to display positivity and self-optimization on social media; and the emergence of subtle forms of emotional disobedience, such as saying no, crying, or refusing to perform happiness. Emotional distress is not treated solely as a clinical symptom, but as a response to cultural discourses that moralize well-being and privatize suffering. Sadness, fatigue, or vulnerability are frequently interpreted as moral deficits, rather than legitimate reactions to structural pressures. However, participants' small acts of resistance suggest alternative ways of inhabiting emotional life. This study contributes to critical debates on affect, gender, and neoliberalism by situating emotional suffering within broader sociopolitical dynamics. It invites researchers and practitioners to rethink emotional discomfort not as an individual flaw, but as a potential space for resistance and redefinition of well-being.

Keywords

neoliberalism, emotional regulation, feminist psychology, subjectivation, emotional distress, reflexive thematic analysis, affective politics



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Resumen

Este artículo, enmarcado en la psicología feminista crítica y en una epistemología cualitativa reflexiva, analiza cómo mujeres jóvenes experimentan la presión emocional en el contexto de la subjetivación neoliberal. A partir de entrevistas en profundidad con doce mujeres de entre 22 y 28 años, con estudios universitarios y residentes en ciudades españolas, se exploran vivencias de ansiedad, autoexigencia y malestar afectivo. El análisis temático revela cuatro ejes principales: la interiorización de un “yo ideal” emocionalmente competente y productivo; el silenciamiento del malestar por temor al juicio o culpa por no estar “agradecidas”; la presión en redes sociales para mostrarse felices, fuertes y en control; y la aparición de pequeñas formas de disidencia emocional, como decir “no”, llorar en público o dejar de rendir cuentas por sentirse mal. Estos hallazgos sugieren que el sufrimiento emocional no puede entenderse únicamente como una cuestión clínica o individual, sino como una respuesta situada ante normas culturales que moralizan el bienestar y privatizan el sufrimiento. A través de una lente crítica y feminista, este estudio visibiliza cómo las emociones son reguladas, escenificadas y también cuestionadas, abriendo espacios para imaginar formas más habitables de vida emocional.

Palabras Clave

neoliberalismo, regulación emocional, psicología feminista, subjetivación, malestar emocional, análisis temático reflexivo, política afectiva

Non-Technical Summary

Background

In recent years, many young women have reported feeling anxious, emotionally exhausted, and under pressure to appear strong, resilient, and productive at all times. While these feelings are often framed as individual or psychological problems, they are also shaped by broader cultural messages. In particular, social media and popular narratives about empowerment and self-care often present emotional well-being as a personal duty. This makes it difficult to express discomfort, rest, or ask for support without feeling guilty or inadequate.

Why was this study done?

This study was carried out to understand better how young women in Spain experience and make sense of emotional struggles in everyday life. We wanted to explore how cultural expectations—especially those related to positivity, emotional control, and self-optimization—affect how women feel, act, and relate to themselves. We were also interested in small acts of resistance: moments when women push back, even subtly, against the pressure to always be okay.

What did the researchers do and find?

We conducted twelve in-depth interviews with university-educated women aged 22 to 28, all living in Spanish cities. Through a careful analysis of their stories, we identified several key patterns. Many participants described a strong internal pressure to stay positive, appear emotionally competent, and avoid expressing sadness or vulnerability—even when struggling. These pressures were often linked to feelings of guilt or fear of being seen as weak.

Social media played a central role in reinforcing these emotional norms. Participants felt expected to show themselves as happy, successful, and emotionally balanced online. Even when they knew others were also “faking it,” the pressure to appear well was difficult to avoid.

Despite this, several women shared experiences of emotional fatigue and described small but meaningful acts of resistance. These included saying no to social invitations, resting without guilt, or crying in front of others. Though often accompanied by doubt or shame, these gestures represented what we call “affective disobedience”—quiet refusals to follow the emotional rules imposed by contemporary culture.

What do these findings mean?

Our findings suggest that the emotional distress many young women face is not just personal or clinical—it is also deeply shaped by social norms that equate emotional success with constant positivity, self-control, and individual responsibility. While these ideals may appear empowering, they can leave people feeling isolated, inadequate, or like they are failing when they cannot keep up.

At the same time, the moments of resistance described by participants offer hope. Choosing to rest, express sadness, or say no can be powerful acts of self-care and resistance, even if they are small and imperfect. These acts challenge the idea that emotional strength means always coping and never breaking down.

For therapists, educators, and policymakers, this study is a reminder that emotional well-being should not be understood only as an individual task. Our emotional lives are shaped by the cultures we live in. Supporting mental health also means creating spaces where people can be vulnerable, take pauses, and express difficult emotions—without guilt or fear of being judged.

In recent years, a subtle yet persistent form of emotional distress has become increasingly visible among many young women. This distress is marked by anxiety, exhaustion, guilt for resting, emotional hypervigilance, and constant self-demand. These symptoms are often interpreted through individualizing clinical frameworks, yet they also reflect broader structural logics. This article departs from the hypothesis that such distress cannot be fully understood as a personal failure, but rather as the effect of a deeper socio-cultural rationality: the neoliberal one. Recent studies have begun to document this

phenomenon across Western contexts, linking it to gendered pressures of productivity, positivity, and self-regulation (Cabanias & Illouz, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2015; OECD, 2023).

Focusing on the Spanish context, this work examines how emotional distress among young women has gained growing visibility in both institutional discourses and public debate. Fieldwork was conducted in Zaragoza (Northeastern Spain) between September and December 2024, amid intensified public concern about youth mental health. At that time, Spain was grappling with the aftermath of the pandemic, a deteriorating housing situation, rising inflation, and mounting academic and labor-related pressures. Emotional health had become a political and cultural issue, often framed through depoliticized narratives of self-care, resilience, and personal responsibility, while online platforms amplified normative messages around wellness, success, and emotional performance. Recent reports document a significant increase in psychological distress among Spanish youth—especially among women—linked to social comparison, academic pressure, and emotional overexertion (Folch et al., 2023; INJUVE, 2021; Tamarit et al., 2020). These dynamics formed the backdrop against which participants made sense of their affective experiences and internalized emotional mandates.

Zaragoza is a mid-sized regional capital with a service-dominated economy (public administration, retail, hospitality, education), a sizeable university population, and housing pressures in central districts that often lead young adults to share flats or delay residential independence. Public and platformed discourses that prize positivity, resilience, and self-optimization circulate widely in workplaces and educational spaces, while social media intensifies visibility demands and comparison. Migrant and racialized communities are present in the city and region, although they were under-represented in our sample (see [Limitations](#)). We therefore read our material as situated in an urban, university-linked milieu where neoliberal affective mandates are especially salient.

We selected Zaragoza because it concentrates young women navigating high expectations of competence and composure in education and early-career trajectories, providing a critical case for examining how affective mandates are internalized, negotiated, and sometimes refused. Practical and ethical considerations also mattered: established collaborations in the area facilitated recruitment and safeguards for care, while keeping granular identifiers (e.g., specific institutions or neighborhoods) unnamed reduced identifiability risks.

Situated in this context, the study explores how neoliberal affective imperatives are internalized, narrated, and—at times—subtly resisted by young women living in Spain today. By framing emotional distress within the affective economy of contemporary urban life, it contributes to a critical understanding of how structural conditions become embedded in psychological norms and everyday self-regulatory practices.

The research is driven by a dual concern. First, it aims to understand how emotional suffering is experienced and narrated from the perspective of those who live it. Second, it seeks to explore the implications of such understanding for rethinking everyday prac-

tices in therapeutic, educational, and institutional settings. These include interventions that promote emotional adjustment through resilience programs, self-help narratives, or individualized coping strategies without addressing the conditions that produce distress. The goal is to foster a critical perspective on how affective expectations are internalized and normalized in contemporary social contexts.

Specifically, the article investigates how young women construct, experience, and negotiate an “ideal self” shaped by expectations of emotional productivity, affective competence, and continuous self-improvement. Contemporary discourses of empowerment, positivity, and wellness, far from being neutral, appear to support the normalization of a managed, optimized, and evaluable emotionality governed by performance criteria.

From a critical psychosocial standpoint, this phenomenon can be understood as part of a neoliberal logic that extends beyond the economic sphere to shape common sense and subjective practices (Brown, 2015; Han, 2015). This rationality draws on therapeutic, motivational, and emotional discourses to promote individual self-regulation (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Illouz, 2007). Mandatory positivity, moralized resilience, and affective self-management are framed as tools for empowerment while simultaneously operating as technologies of emotional power (Ahmed, 2010; Rottenberg, 2018).

In particular, the discourse of female empowerment has been rearticulated within neoliberal frameworks that emphasize personal responsibility, individual choice, and constant self-optimization—detached from the structural conditions that shape everyday life (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2015; McRobbie, 2009). Mental health, in this light, is increasingly framed not as a collective right but as a personal duty, thus reinforcing the privatization of suffering and obscuring its structural roots.

Although this trend has been extensively analyzed in Anglo-American contexts (e.g., Dosekun, 2020; Phipps, 2020), empirical research on how these affective mandates shape the emotional lives of young women in Southern Europe remains scarce. While feminist qualitative scholarship is well established in Spain, there is comparatively less empirical work that examines how neoliberal affective mandates—composure, resilience, self-optimization—shape young women’s everyday emotional life. Our contribution is to address this specific gap by analyzing how such mandates are internalized, negotiated, and sometimes refused in an urban, university-linked milieu. By centering women’s situated voices, the study aims to broaden the affective geography of neoliberalism from a critical Southern European perspective. While our sample is relatively homogeneous—urban, university-educated young women—an intersectional lens remains essential to understand how neoliberal affective mandates are differentially shaped by race, class, migration status, disability, and sexuality. Even when these axes were not primary recruitment targets, they implicitly structure access to emotional resources, exposure to surveillance, and the moralization of distress. We therefore read participants’ accounts as situated at a particular intersection of gender, youth, and educational privilege, while acknowledging blind spots that call for further inquiry.

Moreover, drawing from intersectional and postcolonial feminist thought (Hooks, 1994; Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 2005), the article highlights the need to diversify epistemological frameworks in global psychological research. While this study does not directly address issues of race or migration, it acknowledges their importance and encourages further intersectional inquiry.

Guided by a critical feminist theoretical framework, the article addresses the following questions:

- How do these women make sense of internalized emotional pressure and affective responsibility?
- What narratives of suffering and strength emerge from their everyday experiences?
- What forms of emotional disobedience or resistance, however incipient, begin to take shape?

Rather than offering a definitive diagnosis, this work aims to open a space for listening to emotional distress not only as a clinical symptom, but also as a legitimate—and potentially transformative—form of affective dissent. Through this critical listening, the study seeks to inform practices that promote less normative, more livable, and collectively sustainable forms of well-being.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Neoliberalism as a Rationality That Produces Subjectivity

In recent decades, various critical approaches have moved beyond understanding neoliberalism solely as an economic policy or set of market reforms. Instead, they have conceptualized it as a rationality that not only reshapes institutions but also molds emotions, relationships, and the very construction of the self (Brown, 2015; Foucault et al., 2008). From this perspective, neoliberalism does not act solely from the outside; it infiltrates the everyday through discourses, practices, and technologies that frame the subject as responsible for their own well-being, emotional state, and self-realization.

Within this framework, the subject emerges as an emotional enterprise of the self: constantly invited to manage their image, mental health, resilience, and affective performance. The body, time, relationships—even rest—are transformed into assets to be optimized (Han, 2015; Rottenberg, 2018). In such a regime, emotional suffering is understood less as an expression of social or structural tension and more as a sign of failure in personal self-management.

In what follows, we understand governmentality in a Foucauldian sense—as dispersed techniques that govern by shaping conduct through responsabilization and self-management. In its neoliberal guise, this governmentality hails subjects as entrepreneurial, self-optimizing individuals who must regulate their feelings to appear composed and efficient (Brown, 2015; Foucault et al., 2008; Lorey, 2015). We also work with a pragmatic defini-

tion of affect that spans embodied intensities (anxiety, guilt, exhaustion) and normative expectations about how emotions ought to be felt and displayed. From this vantage point, what we call silent affective governmentality organizes rather than prohibits: it establishes legitimate emotions and narrative frameworks while rendering certain forms of dissent unintelligible or improper. In this context, suffering easily turns into self-blame and sadness is read as emotional dysfunction.

This perspective aligns with critiques that identify a happiness imperative that turns well-being into a moral duty and resilience into a marker of worth (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019), and with warnings that those who fail to embody functional emotionality are rendered problematic or toxic (Ahmed, 2010). While our analysis centers on contemporary Spain, these affective mandates have a longer genealogy. From the late 1970s and the 1980s neoliberal turn (e.g., Thatcher/Reagan), discourses of responsibilization and empowerment reframed citizens as self-managing subjects (Cruikshank, 1999). The 1990s consolidated managerial and therapeutic vocabularies; the 2000s added securitization and austerity (post-9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis); and the 2010s–2020s intensified platform-mediated visibility and metricization of the self. The COVID-19 pandemic further normalized remote, always-on emotional performance. We read participants' accounts within this lineage and its contemporary digital intensifications, which shape both the pressures they face and the forms of refusal available to them.

From a situated feminist lens, this neoliberal rationality takes on specific expressions in the lives of young women, who have historically been socialized into mandates of emotional availability, care, affective stability, and gratitude. This intersection produces distinct forms of diffuse anxiety, silent self-exploitation, and internalized emotional surveillance (Gill & Orgad, 2015; McRobbie, 2009). It is not only a question of what women do, but of how they are expected to feel, narrate, and emotionally evaluate themselves.

At the same time, we acknowledge that this analytical framework—centered on European and Anglo-American theorists—has its limits. This article does not delve into intersections between neoliberalism, racialization, or coloniality, despite their well-documented relevance (Hooks, 2000; Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 2005). Instead, the present study, situated in a contemporary European urban context, is specifically concerned with the intersection of gender, youth, and neoliberal emotional mandates. It does not claim to exhaust the complexity of these phenomena.

Building on this framework, we propose reading participants' emotional distress both as an effect of—and at times as a resistance to—what we refer to as a silent affective governmentality: a form of power that organizes not only behavior, but also legitimate emotions, narrative frameworks, and the very possibilities of affective dissent. This notion guides the analysis of participants' narratives, not only to identify explicit content but also to trace tensions, fractures, and cracks in the ways the self is inhabited.

The Neoliberal “Ideal Self”: Emotionally Profitable Subjectivation

From a critical perspective, it can be argued that neoliberal rationality not only shapes institutions and economic structures, but also configures deeply internalized forms of subjectivity. One of the most recognizable in contemporary narratives is the figure of the “neoliberal ideal self”: a model of the self that combines autonomy, emotional positivity, and constant performance. This figure is not explicitly imposed, but presented as desirable—as a promise of social value, emotional stability, and symbolic belonging (Gill & Orgad, 2015; McRobbie, 2009; Rottenberg, 2018).

This ideal self is defined both by its productive capacity and by its apparent emotional balance. Being positive, resilient, and emotionally self-regulated becomes a form of symbolic capital: a valued resource across different social environments that influences access to recognition, relationships, or subjective well-being (Illouz, 2007). Within this framework, feeling unwell not only causes discomfort, but is experienced as a moral failure or a sign of personal inadequacy. Suffering, thus interpreted, ceases to be a legitimate experience and becomes a dysfunction to be corrected.

As Ahmed (2010) has noted, the happiness imperative is not merely a personal aspiration—it is a normative emotional duty. In this regime, it is not enough to perform: one must perform well, with a positive attitude and a narrative of growth. Emotionality becomes a constant site of evaluation, where displaying vulnerability or asking for help may result in a loss of social value. This pressure generates a form of silent emotional self-exploitation, often expressed through the language of self-care, personal development, or positive management.

For young women, this figure becomes even more complex due to intersecting demands that link performance to femininity. It is not only about being competent or effective, but also emotionally available, attractive, resilient, grateful, healthy—and all of this without showing visible effort. This context produces what Gill and Orgad (2018) have described as performative anxiety: a state of internal emotional surveillance that does not necessarily manifest in overt crises but structures daily experience through tension and ongoing self-evaluation.

From this perspective, the ideal self can be understood less as an external expectation and more as an affective technology of subjectivation. It does not coerce directly, but operates through comparison, internalized norms, and the production of guilt. What appears as a free choice—feeling good, being well, managing oneself positively—is, in many cases, the outcome of deeply conditioned emotional socialization.

We propose, therefore, to understand the neoliberal ideal self as an emotionally profitable configuration: one that is functional for a system requiring emotionally stable, self-regulating, non-demanding, and productive subjects. This concept is not intended to replace others, but to provide an interpretive lens through which to analyze the intersections of gender, emotionality, and contemporary discourses of individual improvement. In the empirical analysis that follows, we explore how participants narrate their distress

not only as a symptom, but at times as a tension, rupture, or emerging form of resistance to this normative figure.

Neoliberal Feminism and the Domestication of Distress

Over the past two decades, the discourse of female empowerment has gained significant visibility across media, educational settings, and corporate environments. The ideal of the young woman who thrives, manages her emotions, and remains productive while smiling has become a dominant cultural script. This narrative, associated with autonomy, resilience, and self-improvement, is often celebrated as a marker of liberation. However, from a critical feminist perspective, it is necessary to interrogate the kind of subjectivity this model promotes and the structures it silently reproduces.

Angela McRobbie (2009) coined the term neoliberal feminism to describe a reconfiguration of feminist discourse, in which collective struggles for equality are replaced by individualized imperatives of constant improvement. Within this framework, women are no longer seen as victims of patriarchal structures but as solely responsible for their own happiness. Structural suffering is reframed as a lack of effort or emotional failure. As Gill and Orgad (2015, 2022) have observed, this narrative displaces blame from the system to the psyche—especially in urban, middle-class young women.

Rottenberg (2018) expands on this critique by showing how this model promotes a narrowly defined female freedom based on emotional self-sufficiency, self-regulation, and performance. Within this logic, agency is measured by the ability to sustain a functional affective balance. Sadness or exhaustion, far from being legitimate signals of strain, are interpreted as narrative failures to be reframed as learning opportunities.

Sara Ahmed (2010) warns that this type of empowerment does not tolerate vulnerability unless it is reformulated. Dissonant affect—feelings that do not align with productive optimism—becomes uncomfortable. Those who do not smile, who grow tired or break down, may be perceived as problematic. In this context, suffering tends to be read not as a response to inequality but as emotional misconduct.

This form of affective subjectivation is not only institutional but also embedded in popular feminist discourse, which—according to Becker and Marecek (2008)—risks depoliticizing women's distress by reducing it to an individual problem. Rather than questioning the regime of positivity and self-optimization, many versions of neoliberal feminism teach women to perform better within it.

The performative turn in empowerment—now transformed into slogan, hashtag, or aesthetic—often dilutes its critical potential. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, popular feminism is increasingly articulated through brand culture and neoliberal logics of visibility, where empowerment becomes a marketable identity rather than a collective political project. As Dosekun (2020) shows, this process takes global forms that also require postcolonial and intersectional analysis.

In contrast to this domestication of emotional distress, emerging narratives of affective saturation—of wanting to stop, to say “enough,” or to no longer be emotionally available—may be understood as cracks in the mandate of positivity and self-sufficiency. These forms of dissent, though fragmented, challenge the emotional logic of the current order. Claiming the right not to be okay does not mean surrendering agency—it means questioning the kind of subjectivity required to be deemed valuable.

In this sense, the narratives gathered in this study should not be interpreted solely in clinical terms. The anxiety, fatigue, or self-demand expressed by the participants can also be understood as manifestations of structural distress, experienced through specific bodies and shaped by contradictory cultural mandates. Through this lens, the following sections analyze the collected narratives, paying special attention to the moments in which participants—whether explicitly or implicitly—challenge the dominant emotional logic.

Social Media and the Constant Performance of the Self

In the daily lives of many young women, social media platforms are not merely spaces for entertainment, but central arenas for visibility, emotional regulation, and identity construction. Far from being neutral tools, they operate as affective technologies of power (Ahmed, 2010), where a neoliberal subjectivity rooted in continuous optimization is reproduced: visible happiness, aesthetic productivity, emotional resilience, and healthy perfection.

This logic generates sustained emotional pressure that rarely manifests as acute trauma, but rather as a form of chronic, diffuse, and normalized anxiety (Gill & Orgad, 2018). It is not enough to be well—one must appear so, prove it, and constantly update it. Identity becomes a performative project managed publicly—an affective brand—whose value is measured in interactions, recognition, and emotional performance (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Marwick, 2013).

Each post, each image, involves micro-decisions loaded with tension: how to present oneself, how to narrate suffering in an acceptable way, how to embody positivity without appearing superficial. Gill (2007) and Dobson (2015) describe how this selfie culture installs forms of affective self-surveillance that are particularly demanding for young women, who are required to manage their emotions as symbolic capital. Even digital forms of empowerment—such as selfie feminism or aesthetic self-acceptance—can, in certain contexts, reinforce the same mandates of positivity, beauty, and personal improvement they claim to challenge (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017).

This constant exposure intensifies contradictory emotional mandates: to be beautiful yet natural, strong yet approachable, successful yet modest. Emotional positivity becomes normative, and suffering is displaced into the private sphere or translated into profitable narratives of resilience (“I went through a hard time, but now I’m stronger”). Ahmed (2010) warns that this happiness imperative functions as a mechanism of exclu-

sion: those who do not conform to it are perceived as fragile, negative, or emotionally inadequate.

Participants verbalized a diffuse fatigue, a difficulty maintaining the image they project, or a need to disconnect from the “emotional persona” they feel they have created online. These tensions are not merely anecdotal; they reveal the affective impact of a context in which positivity, productivity, and performative self-worth have become everyday emotional imperatives.

These narrative cracks suggest that even in highly normative spaces, forms of affective dissent can emerge: small acts of saturation, withdrawal, or refusal that interrupt—even if only momentarily—the dominant emotional regime. As Gill and Orgad (2018) note, the challenge is not only to understand distress, but to make visible how it is constructed, aestheticized, and normalized precisely in those spaces where greater agency is expected.

Method

Epistemological Approach

This study is grounded in a critical qualitative epistemology, informed by feminist theory, situated knowledge, and interpretive inquiry. Within this perspective, knowledge is not viewed as a mirror of reality but as a relational, partial, and historically situated construction—shaped by power dynamics, cultural narratives, and the researcher’s own positionality (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Hooks, 1994). Rather than seeking universal truths, this approach emphasizes understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences within sociopolitical structures of inequality and affective regulation.

The choice of a qualitative methodology responds to the study’s aim of exploring complex emotional phenomena—such as moralized anxiety, internalized emotional mandates, and self-demand—which are often pathologized or depoliticized within dominant clinical frameworks. A narrative-centered approach enabled attention to the symbolic, affective, and contextual dimensions of distress without reducing them to diagnostic or individualistic categories.

Importantly, the feminist orientation underpinning this research is not limited to its thematic focus on young women’s experiences. It informs the entire research logic—from the formulation of questions to the interpretation of narratives—by foregrounding relational ethics, epistemic accountability, and resistance to discourses that normalize emotional self-exploitation (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Jaggar, 2014).

The researcher’s own position—as a woman of similar generational and educational background—constituted a double condition. On one hand, it fostered affective proximity and trust during the research encounter. On the other, it required ongoing reflexivity regarding how shared cultural codes might obscure differences, reproduce complicity, or

create blind spots (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). Rather than being viewed as a methodological threat, this involvement was mobilized as a resource for interpreting the tensions, contradictions, and silences embedded in participants' narratives.

In this framework, participants were not approached as clinical cases, but as active meaning-makers navigating and narrating affective contradictions in a specific socio-cultural context. This situated reflexivity also opened space to question dominant psychological categories—such as “failure,” “instability,” or “lack of resilience”—as affective effects of structural expectations and normative ideals of emotional performance. In this way, the analysis did not seek to diagnose or classify, but to explore how distress is lived, narrated, and occasionally contested within broader affective regimes.

The knowledge generated does not aim for statistical generalization, but rather for interpretive, political, and ethical resonance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Relevance was understood in terms of the capacity to foster critical insight, cultural intelligibility, and engagement with broader social conversations—both within and beyond academic spaces.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive design aimed at understanding how young women make sense of emotional distress in the context of neoliberal mandates of performance, positivity, and empowerment. Rather than seeking causal explanations or statistical generalizations, the study sought to generate situated, relational, and critically engaged knowledge about the narratives emerging around anxiety, emotional self-demand, and the construction of the “ideal self.”

Drawing on a discursive and post-foundational approach, emotional experiences were not treated as fixed intrapsychic states, but as dynamic and relational constructions shaped by cultural frameworks, gendered expectations, and normative discourses (Davies & Harré, 1990; Gergen, 1991). These affective forms of subjectivation were examined within the sociopolitical context of post-pandemic Spain, marked by intensified pressures related to academic performance, economic precarity, and emotional self-regulation in digital spaces.

The analysis focused on participants' narratives, conceived not as transparent expressions of an inner self, but as situated discursive practices through which social meanings, moral orientations, and emotional tensions were negotiated. Particular care was taken to avoid flattening participants' accounts into overly coherent narratives. Contradictions, hesitations, and emotional ambivalences were preserved as meaningful components of the analysis, not as inconsistencies to be resolved.

This discursive, post-foundational positioning allowed for attention not only to thematic content, but also to silences, ambivalences, and affective contradictions that reveal the complexities of living under a neoliberal emotional regime.

Participants

The sample consisted of twelve young women, aged between 22 and 28, all residing in urban areas of Spain and either currently enrolled in or recently graduated from university-level education. Although the inclusion criteria allowed for ages 20 to 30, the final sample naturally concentrated within a narrower range. All participants reported sustained emotional distress related to self-demand, anxiety, social comparison, perfectionism, and a persistent sense of inadequacy in response to everyday pressures.

While statistical representativeness was not pursued, the sample included a range of academic and professional trajectories, employment conditions, and affective narratives. Most participants lived in Zaragoza, but differed in terms of living arrangements, financial stability, and subjective relation to emotional mandates. The decision to focus on urban, university-educated women responds to the study's theoretical emphasis on how neoliberal emotional logics are articulated in settings of educational privilege, visibility, and self-regulatory expectations—contexts where positivity, performance, and self-improvement are particularly emphasized.

Inclusion criteria required participants to self-identify as women, be between 20 and 30 years of age, and have experienced ongoing emotional discomfort related to performance, control, or affective self-optimization. During initial contact, we used a brief screening to ensure analytic relevance: candidates described ongoing emotional discomfort related to performance, control, or affective self-optimization (in recent months) and outlined their typical engagement with social media (platforms used and general frequency). We sought regular engagement to address dynamics of visibility and comparison, but we did not impose quantitative thresholds nor exclude low-activity users. The final sample largely consisted of women reporting some routine platform use.

In line with the study's non-clinical and non-pathologizing stance, we excluded participants undergoing acute emotional crises at the time of fieldwork—based on mutual agreement rather than diagnostic criteria. This exclusion criterion and the mutual agreement at initial contact ensured that participation was emotionally sustainable and ethically sound. When needed, participants were informed of available support resources.

We used a purposive sampling strategy, combining direct invitations to women known to the researcher with snowball recruitment. This approach, grounded in trust and generational proximity, fostered the emergence of intimate, reflective narratives and facilitated the creation of an emotionally safe interview environment.

The final number of interviews ($N = 12$) was determined according to principles of narrative richness and theoretical sufficiency (Charmaz, 2014), rather than saturation in a positivist sense. In critically oriented qualitative research, the value of the sample lies not in its size but in its capacity to illuminate lived contradictions, emotional ambivalences, and the discursive production of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this study, the depth and diversity of participants' accounts provided a robust

foundation for analyzing how neoliberal affective mandates are embodied, negotiated, and—at times—resisted by young women in contemporary Spain.

Our reliance on urban, university-based personal/professional networks and snowballing facilitated trust and depth, yet it likely introduced affinity- and convenience-bias, narrowing the intersectional range of experiences represented. In particular, it may have tilted participation toward women sharing similar educational, urban, and socio-cultural milieus and discouraged more dissenting or less institutionally connected voices. We sought to surface dissonant narratives during coding and through peer debriefing; nonetheless, a more purposive, intersectionally oriented recruitment would better capture how affective mandates—and refusals—are (re)configured across structural locations.

Procedure

The data collection technique employed in this study was the in-depth semi-structured interview, selected for its capacity to explore the emotional, symbolic, and narrative dimensions of participants' distress. This format allowed for a general thematic structure to be followed, while also maintaining a flexible and open conversational space that respected the rhythm and expressive style of each woman.

We conceived the interviews as relational and reflexive encounters grounded in care and horizontality, deliberately distanced from an interrogative logic. The aim was not to extract information, but to co-construct meaning through attentive, validating listening. In line with the study's feminist and critical epistemological framework, the interview was approached as an ethical-political space where participants could articulate affective experiences in their own terms.

Prior to each interview, participants received a brief explanation of the study's aims and were invited to ask questions, clarify doubts, and confirm their comfort with the recording process. Throughout the conversation, they were reminded that they could skip any question or pause the interview at any time without pressure. Emotional hesitations or silences were respected as meaningful elements, rather than seen as obstacles to data production.

The interview guide was informed by prior critical feminist literature on affective labor, neoliberal agency, and emotional regulation. It covered several core thematic areas: perceptions of the "ideal self" and personal expectations; the relationship with productivity, success, and rest; emotional management and subjective discomfort; the influence of social media on self-image and self-worth; discourses of empowerment, resilience, and self-help; experiences of guilt, comparison, and everyday anxiety; and personal strategies for coping with or resisting these emotional mandates. For instance, participants were invited to reflect on questions such as: "What does being emotionally strong mean to you?" or "Can you describe a moment when you felt you were falling short of who you 'should' be?" A full version of the semi-structured interview guide is included in the [Appendix](#).

We conducted all interviews individually and online (via video call), for reasons of accessibility, convenience, and within the social context of the post-pandemic period. We encouraged participants to choose a private, comfortable setting, and the digital format enabled participation from different cities, while fostering a sense of intimacy as conversations unfolded in familiar environments. The online interview modality was also consistent with the ethics of accessibility and the shifting affective geographies of everyday life in the wake of COVID-19. We were mindful that network-based recruitment can heighten social-desirability dynamics—especially when participants perceived indirect ties to the researchers—so we emphasized confidentiality, normalized ambivalence and critique, and reiterated that disagreement with dominant narratives was welcome.

Conducting interviews online shaped disclosure in specific ways. For some participants, the familiar home setting lowered social risk, enabling calibrated vulnerability and greater control over visibility (e.g., camera on/off, pacing, breaks). Conversely, digital mediation may have flattened affective and embodied cues—masking micro-silences, overlaps, gestures, or shifts in posture. We attended to these dynamics by slowing the interview pace, explicitly welcoming silence and hesitation, and annotating paralinguistic features (tone, tempo, pauses) in reflexive field notes; when connectivity glitches interrupted a thread, we named the disruption and revisited the narrative rather than reading it as lack of meaning.

The interview guide included prompts on platform-specific affordances (e.g., posts/stories, seen receipts, streaks, follower counts), audience management (close-friends lists, archiving), comparison, and affective self-presentation; low activity or selective non-participation were treated as meaningful practices rather than exclusion criteria. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. With participants' consent, we audio-recorded the interviews, transcribed them verbatim, and documented emotional tone, silences, hesitations, emphases, and significant non-verbal cues in reflexive field notes. These methodological decisions were aimed at ensuring a dense, situated, and ethically engaged approach to the voices and experiences shared.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed an inductive–deductive logic, grounded in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) and adapted through a critical feminist lens. This method allowed for the integration of theoretical sensitivity with openness to the situated, ambivalent, and sometimes contradictory character of participants' accounts. The aim was not to “verify” predefined concepts, but to explore how young women narrate, negotiate, and occasionally resist dominant emotional norms.

The process began with familiarization through multiple readings of the transcripts, accompanied by analytical memos that noted tensions, silences, and emerging affective patterns.

We coded the data manually, attending to meaning units related to emotional mandates, the ideal self, performativity, guilt, comparison, or resistance. Specifically, we identified affective mandates when participants invoked moralized expectations about feeling and performance (e.g., positivity, resilience, composure), and we traced how these mandates were internalized, negotiated, or refused across narratives and paralinguistic/non-verbal cues. The coding followed a two-phase strategy. First, an open coding phase identified initial meaning units in a grounded, inductive way. Then, axial coding was used to group these into conceptual categories that captured tensions, recurrences, or emotional logics.

These categories formed the basis for the thematic configurations developed later in the analysis. This two-phase coding strategy helped preserve the complexity and ambiguity of narratives while identifying shared affective patterns. To counter potential network effects in interpretation, we engaged in negative-case analysis, retained dissonant/counter-narratives during coding, and held peer-debriefing sessions with colleagues outside our immediate networks; we also kept reflexive memos documenting how recruitment pathways might have influenced meaning-making.

We gradually clustered preliminary codes into thematic configurations—not as fixed categories, but as interpretive axes that illuminated recurring emotional logics across narratives. These configurations were refined iteratively in dialogue with the theoretical framework, while remaining attentive to what exceeded or unsettled it. Thematic revision prioritized cultural resonance and affective density over frequency, in line with the study's interpretive and critical orientation.

Throughout the process, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance regarding her own positionality and assumptions. Peer debriefing sessions with three colleagues from a feminist qualitative research group enriched the interpretive process and supported analytical transparency. Rather than aiming for thematic saturation or representational completeness, the analysis sought interpretive depth, narrative nuance, and epistemic integrity.

Ultimately, the results do not seek to universalize or pathologize emotional experiences, but to situate them within a broader affective economy shaped by neoliberal ideals of performance, positivity, and self-regulation. In doing so, the analysis foregrounds the cultural and political dimensions of emotional distress as narrated by the participants.

Ethical Considerations

The design and development of this study adhered to the fundamental ethical principles of qualitative research with human participants: autonomy, informed consent, confidentiality, relational care, and narrative justice. In line with the critical and feminist orientation of the study, particular attention was paid to the power dynamics inherent in the research process, as well as to the potential emotional impact of the interviews.

All participants were informed—both verbally and in writing—about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidential handling of their data. We ensured anonymity by using pseudonyms and omitting identifying information. We recorded interviews only with explicit consent, stored them in secure digital environments, and deleted the files after transcription and final analysis.

Drawing from a feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1993; Hooks, 1994), the interview was conceived not as a data extraction technique but as a relational space: an encounter where both speech and silence were valued, and where respect for the participant's lived experience guided every interaction. Narrative pressure was consciously avoided, pauses were offered when needed, and active listening was maintained to honor each participant's expressive agency.

Throughout the research process, a posture of critical reflexivity was sustained to examine the researcher's own positionality, emotional investments, beliefs, and potential biases. Knowledge was understood as always situated, co-constructed, and shaped by power relations.

Although the study did not involve legally recognized vulnerable populations or invasive procedures, all recommended ethical guidelines for qualitative research in psychology were followed. The research process was carefully documented to ensure transparency, traceability, and methodological accountability.

Results

“I Have to Handle It All”: The Mandate of the Ideal Self

A recurring thread in participants' narratives was the internalized demand to remain emotionally stable, productive, and self-sufficient at all times. This pressure was rarely named as a structural imposition. Rather, it was experienced as an inner voice—persistent, moralizing, and often difficult to distinguish from one's own thoughts or values.

“Even if I'm exhausted, I keep telling myself: don't be weak, don't stop. I don't even know if it's my own thought or something I've absorbed. But it's always there.”

(Lucía, 23)

This “ideal self” echoes the affective model described by Gill and Orgad (2015): a self that is grateful, positive, and resilient. Yet participants did not always articulate it in the same way. Some embraced it as a sign of strength or maturity, while others questioned it more explicitly. For many, the mandate felt naturalized—“just how things are”—but its origin remained opaque.

“I guess I’ve always thought it was normal, like... if you can’t manage your emotions, then you’re not really an adult.”
(Marta, 23)

Interestingly, a few participants expressed ambivalence about this logic. They acknowledged the emotional cost of maintaining composure and self-sufficiency, yet simultaneously blamed themselves when they failed to do so. This created moments of cognitive and affective dissonance.

“I know it’s not fair to expect myself to be fine all the time, but if I break down, I feel like I’ve failed somehow. It’s like I believe both things at once.”
(Andrea, 27)

Not all participants framed their emotional demands as negative. A couple of them spoke about the pressure to “keep it together” as a protective mechanism, especially in contexts where showing emotion was previously punished or misunderstood.

These divergent and sometimes contradictory accounts suggest that the ideal of the emotionally competent self is not a fixed identity but a negotiated and unstable affective reference. It may be mobilized differently depending on each woman’s history, environment, and relational context. Rather than treating it as a universal internalization, we interpret it as a flexible script, activated and inhabited in ways that mix identification, resistance, and emotional ambivalence.

Silenced Distress: When Feeling Becomes Uncomfortable

A transversal theme that emerged throughout the interviews was the experience of discomfort, confusion, or guilt when feeling or expressing negative emotions—especially in the absence of a “clear” or external cause. Several participants described how sadness or anxiety would appear “out of nowhere,” and their first reaction was not self-compassion but doubt, irritation, or self-correction.

“There are days when I wake up with a knot in my chest, not wanting to do anything. But the first thing I think is: ‘Come on, don’t be dramatic, get up’. Like... feeling bad isn’t an option. And if I do feel bad, I feel guilty, like I’m weak.”
(Nerea, 23)

This logic, while not always fully conscious, reflects a broader emotional regime where only justified or productive emotions are tolerated. In this context, distress that cannot be rationalized tends to be denied, hidden, or interpreted as personal failure.

"I sometimes feel really anxious, but I just smile and pretend it's fine. I'm scared people will think I'm unstable, or like I'm too much."
(Paula, 25)

For some, this silencing was framed as a learned response—something that had helped them in the past or was expected in their family or work environment. Others recognized it as harmful, yet still felt unable to do otherwise.

"I don't even know who to talk to. I don't want to worry anyone. And honestly, I feel like they'd think I'm exaggerating. So I keep it to myself."
(Claudia, 24)

These narratives resonate with what [Ahmed \(2010\)](#) calls the "happiness mandate": a cultural expectation that treats negativity not just as unpleasant, but as morally suspect. In this framework, suffering must be corrected or hidden, rather than explored or shared.

Participants described strategies to manage this internal conflict—some used humor, others intellectualized their distress, and many spoke of isolation as a form of emotional self-regulation. However, several also acknowledged the long-term cost of these strategies.

"I hold it in and hold it in, until something tiny makes me explode. Then I feel stupid for reacting like that, but I realize I haven't allowed myself to feel anything for days."
(Ana, 26)

Importantly, not all silencing was framed as externally imposed. Some women described it as an automatic, internalized pattern—something they did without even realizing. Others named it as a protective mechanism: a way of staying functional in environments that were not emotionally safe.

Rather than interpreting this distress as a lack of emotional competence, we understand it as a situated response to affective norms that reward positivity and penalize fragility. In this sense, emotional silencing becomes both an individual coping strategy and a reflection of broader structural pressures.

Emotional Performance Online: Visibility, Comparison, and Anxiety

Across all interviews, social media emerged as a central space for emotional regulation, self-exposure, and comparison. Participants did not experience these platforms merely as tools for entertainment or connection, but as arenas where personal and emotional value is at stake.

Several women described small decisions that, while seemingly minor, were experienced as acts of subjective affirmation: saying no, allowing themselves to cry, resting without justification, or showing vulnerability without apology. These actions challenge the ideal of constant emotional self-control and open up possibilities for inhabiting emotionality differently.

“Recently I said no to a plan because I was exhausted. I felt guilty, but also relieved. It was like a ‘no’ I owed myself. I didn’t have the energy to be the same as always—the cheerful one, the one who’s okay.”

(Lucía, 23)

These resistances do not appear as fully consolidated discourses but rather as affective gestures marked by ambivalence—interrupted by guilt, fear of judgment, or the feeling of not doing “the right thing.” Nevertheless, as [Ahmed \(2010\)](#) suggests, the decision not to perform emotional resilience or positivity in public can be understood as a form of affective disobedience against the neoliberal emotional regime.

Tired of Being Strong: Emerging Affective Dissidences

Although much of the discourse gathered reflects a deep internalization of the neoliberal ideal of emotional strength, several interviews revealed moments of exhaustion, saturation, and small subjective ruptures. Some participants began to voice their weariness at having to constantly uphold an image of resilience, positivity, and self-sufficiency.

“I’m tired of pretending I’m okay. Some days I don’t want to do anything and I feel guilty, but I also think: why do I have to be okay all the time? I’m starting to get exhausted from this constant pressure.”

(Nuria, 24)

These expressions, still fragile, point to a fissure in the logic of emotional performance. They do not articulate an explicit or systematic rejection of the ideal self, but they reflect an emerging awareness of the emotional exhaustion that comes with embodying it.

“I don’t want to keep pretending everything’s fine. It’s hard, because I feel weird saying ‘I can’t take it anymore,’ but that’s what I feel. And sometimes I just want someone to hear me without giving me advice on how to overcome it.”

(Marina, 26)

These forms of resistance did not emerge as coherent discourses, but rather as hesitant gestures marked by contradiction and ambivalence—often followed by guilt, fear of judgment, or a lingering sense of not doing “the right thing.”

“Sometimes I feel proud of saying no, but then I spend hours wondering if I was selfish or dramatic.”
(Celia, 25)

Nonetheless, as [Ahmed \(2010\)](#) argues, the refusal to embody emotional resilience or positivity in public can itself be a form of affective dissidence within the neoliberal emotional regime. These minor ruptures challenged not only an external expectation but an internalized ideal that often feels inseparable from one’s identity.

“Lately I cry more in front of people. Yes, I’m embarrassed, but I also think: it is what it is. I’m not okay, and I don’t want to keep hiding it. If that makes people uncomfortable, well, so be it.”
(Celia, 25)

These micro-practices of subjective disruption invite us to reconsider agency not as heroic or radical, but as an embodied and situated capacity for everyday affective disobedience ([Cvetkovich, 2012](#); [Lazar, 2014](#)). While these acts did not always bring relief or resolution, they were often described as necessary—however uncomfortable—for reclaiming emotional honesty.

In a context where distress is privatized and framed as a symptom of individual insufficiency, inhabiting fragility may become a political gesture. These affective dissonances, though fragmented, highlight the political potential of emotional distress—once it stops being silenced and begins to be narrated as excess, limit, or quiet resistance.

Critical Discussion

This study has explored how young women internalize, negotiate, and sometimes resist the mandate of emotional performance within a neoliberal affective regime. The findings suggest that the emotional distress they describe—manifesting as anxiety, guilt, exhaustion, and feelings of inadequacy—should not be read solely as clinical symptoms, but as the effects of a diffuse, culturally embedded, and deeply embodied form of power ([Brown, 2015](#); [Foucault et al., 2008](#); [Lorey, 2015](#)).

Rather than being imposed from outside, this regime operates through affective and moral expectations that become internalized and personalized. Participants did not simply conform to the ideal self; they measured themselves against it, judged their worth through it, and at times questioned it. This internalization of a “resilient and competent” ideal echoes the postfeminist emotional subject described by [Gill and Orgad \(2015, 2022\)](#). Sadness was often interpreted as ingratitude, fatigue as weakness, and anxiety as a failure of self-regulation—a dynamic that resonates with [Ahmed’s \(2010\)](#) notion of the “happiness mandate”, which frames negativity as a moral failure rather than a valid emotional state. This pattern also aligns with what [Cabanis and Illouz \(2019\)](#) describe

as a “happycracy,” where emotional well-being is reframed as an individual moral duty, disconnected from the structural conditions that produce suffering.

Importantly, we anticipate that the moralization of composure and the costs of visibility vary across intersectional locations—e.g., racialization, classed precarity, migration, and queer visibility may amplify or attenuate exposure to affective mandates. We therefore treat the present findings as situated rather than universal, and as a starting point for comparative, intersectionally purposive inquiry.

The thematic analysis highlighted four key affective configurations: the internalization of a hyperfunctional, emotionally competent and available “ideal self”; the silencing or self-correction of emotional discomfort, especially when lacking a clear cause; the performative pressures of social media, where emotional life becomes both aestheticized and monitored; and the emergence of small, ambivalent affective gestures that question the dominant emotional ideal.

Read through a feminist qualitative lens, these patterns reflect a postfeminist sensibility (Gill & Orgad, 2015, 2018, 2022) in which positivity and resilience become moralized, gendered affective labor (Ahmed, 2010; Rottenberg, 2018). Our analysis foregrounds how mandates are learned, policed, and negotiated in gendered ways, and how micro-gestures of refusal enact situated agency without recentering individual blame (Ahmed, 2010; Cvetkovich, 2012).

These findings expand on the work of Gill and Orgad (2015, 2018, 2022), who examine the construction of a grateful, high-functioning womanhood under postfeminist neoliberalism. The silencing of discomfort—often framed as personal weakness—can be read through Ahmed’s (2010) critique of emotional governance, where negative emotions are not just discouraged but rendered unspeakable. Similarly, Rottenberg (2018) has shown how popular feminism, reframed through neoliberal logics, promotes empowerment as constant self-optimization, transforming distress into an opportunity for self-betterment—a logic clearly present in participants’ struggles with guilt and productivity.

The present study contributes to a growing body of critical literature at the intersection of gender, neoliberalism, and emotionality, helping to denaturalize the moralization of distress among young women (Ahmed, 2010; Fraser, 2020; Illouz, 2019). It also resonates with scholarship that underscores how these demands are further intensified among bodies marked by race, class, disability, or gender nonconformity (Berlant, 2011; Nash, 2018; Phipps, 2020; Solís, 2022). While this study focused on white, university-educated urban women, future research should extend this analysis to more diverse sociocultural and affective contexts.

Social media emerged as a particularly salient site where emotional norms are enacted, monitored, and challenged. As Dobson (2015), Marwick (2013), and Banet-Weiser (2018) argue, platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become emotional infrastructures, where positivity is currency and authenticity is policed. This aligns with our third theme, in which digital visibility becomes a stage for emotional self-regulation and

comparison. In this landscape, sadness and fragility are not always censored, but must be carefully framed within redemptive narratives of resilience or recovery.

Crucially, the study also reveals the cracks and frictions within this emotional regime. The small acts described by participants—crying without apology, saying no, resisting the demand to justify one’s sadness—may seem minor, but they carry significant emotional and political weight. These actions can be interpreted as what Ahmed (2010) terms “affective dissent”, or what Cvetkovich (2012) might describe as everyday ruptures that resist the privatization of pain. These gestures, marked by ambivalence and hesitation, represent emergent forms of agency that contest the neoliberal grammar of emotional strength.

From the perspective of emotional justice (Núñez, 2023), these findings call for a reassessment of dominant psychological narratives that equate well-being with emotional control and self-discipline. As Becker and Marecek (2008) and Phipps (2020) argue, certain therapeutic discourses risk reinforcing neoliberal norms by individualizing distress and prescribing emotional productivity. This study does not deny the value of personal resources, but insists on the legitimacy of emotional dissonance, fragility, and pause—as spaces from which other subjectivities, attachments, and rhythms may emerge.

Extending this argument—and in line with the genealogy outlined above, the platformization of everyday life exposes young women to continuous affective legibility (e.g., constant availability, composure, upbeat self-presentation) and quantified visibility (metrics, streaks, follower counts). These conditions compress time and widen audiences, raising the costs of dissent. Correspondingly, the modalities of resistance we traced are often micro, stealthy, and situational: muting or turning the camera off, delaying responses, curating absence, refusing gratitude scripts, carving out collective rest or opt-out arrangements, and selectively withdrawing from metricized spaces. Such gestures are modest yet politically meaningful within this contemporary configuration.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Taken together, the four affective configurations identified here have direct consequences for how emotional life is taught, supported, and governed. First, they call for critical reflexivity within psychological and educational settings, where emotional competence is often framed as an individual skill to be cultivated—rather than as a socially conditioned and politically mediated process. Interventions that promote emotional regulation must interrogate the cultural ideals they implicitly reinforce. Second, the results invite mental health professionals and policymakers to challenge dominant narratives that privatize distress and obscure its structural and cultural origins. Approaches centered exclusively on individual adaptation risk reproducing the very emotional mandates that contribute to suffering—particularly among young women navigating spaces of high self-expectation, visibility, and affective control.

More broadly, this study advocates for legitimizing emotional expressions that fall outside the normative frameworks of positivity, productivity, or resilience. Creating spaces—in schools, workplaces, digital environments, and healthcare systems—where fragility is not treated as failure, but as a valid mode of being, is an urgent ethical and political task. These spaces must not only allow for distress, but also recognize the political meaning of discomfort, ambivalence, and emotional limits. The everyday microgestures described by participants—saying no, resting without guilt, expressing sadness without justification—can serve as starting points for reimagining affective support beyond correction or optimization. Practices that affirm these expressions of affective disobedience may foster more humane, plural, and collectively responsive approaches to care.

In sum, this study foregrounds the political potential of distress. Rather than pathologizing it, the challenge is to listen to it as a signal of dissonance with an unjust affective order. Doing so enables us to imagine and co-construct more livable emotional worlds—ones in which being tired, sad, or lost does not diminish one's worth, but can be met with recognition, solidarity, and care.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is based on in-depth interviews with twelve young women living in urban contexts in Spain, offering a situated and interpretive understanding of their emotional experiences. The qualitative, critical, and reflexive design enabled an exploration of how distress is lived, narrated, and contested within a sociocultural landscape shaped by neoliberal discourses of performance, positivity, and emotional self-regulation. However, this approach also entails certain limitations.

First, the findings are not intended to be generalizable but to generate theoretical and affective resonance. The focus on urban, university-educated, and predominantly white women highlights the intensity of neoliberal mandates in contexts of visibility and educational privilege. At the same time, this homogeneity of the sample implies a partial reading of the phenomenon. While analytically fruitful, such a perspective may obscure how emotional mandates operate in other lived realities and structural positions. Anticipating this limitation is important to prevent a homogenized understanding of young women's emotional distress.

Network-based recruitment likely amplified the sample's homogeneity and gatekept certain perspectives. While analytically productive for depth, this approach limits the transferability of our claims beyond urban, university-linked milieus. Accordingly, our predominantly white, university-educated, urban sample narrows the intersectional range of experiences considered.

Future research should intentionally recruit across racialized and migrant communities, working-class and precarious labor contexts, queer and trans participants, and disabled and neurodiverse populations to examine how affective mandates and micro-resistances are reconfigured at these intersections. Comparative designs (urban/rural;

majority/minority; citizen/migrant) and participatory approaches with community partners could help decenter dominant affective norms of “emotional competence” and trace distinctive grammars of affective dissent.

Because data were generated through online, video-based interviews, some embodied and relational cues may have been attenuated despite our efforts to slow the pace, welcome silence, and annotate paralinguistics; this may have constrained interpretations of affective nuance. To protect confidentiality in a small urban scene, we did not systematically collect markers such as racialization or sexual identity, which—together with network-based recruitment—limits the breadth of our intersectional analyses. Self-selection and social-desirability are also possible: volunteers connected to university networks and familiar with critical vocabularies may be overrepresented, and some narratives may have been shaped by perceived ties to the researchers, even though we normalized ambivalence and dissent.

Moreover, fieldwork took place between September and December 2024, a conjuncture marked by post-pandemic strains, housing pressures, and inflation; the salience of some themes may therefore reflect this time-bound context, and transferability to other periods should be cautious. (Interviews were conducted in Spanish and excerpts translated into English for publication; while we sought semantic and affective fidelity, translation may have smoothed idioms or connotations.)

Further studies could also examine more explicitly the intersections between affective self-demand and clinically diagnosed suffering. Exploring how anxiety, burnout, or mood disorders are shaped by the imperative to remain emotionally functional could help bridge critical psychological theory with therapeutic practice, and inform more socially attuned forms of care. Institutional contexts also deserve deeper attention. Schools, therapy spaces, and workplaces often function as laboratories of emotional regulation—reproducing, naturalizing, or occasionally disrupting the emotional ideals examined in this study. Understanding how these institutions shape the affective economy of everyday life is key to developing collective responses.

Methodologically, ethnographic, longitudinal, and participatory approaches may be especially useful to trace how emotional norms are internalized over time, and how small, ambivalent acts of resistance take shape in daily life. Attending to pauses, contradictions, or ordinary ruptures could provide a richer map of how affective agency is exercised—often quietly and without a name.

Although Spain is not among the most structurally marginalized contexts in global academic production, it remains underrepresented in international debates on gendered neoliberal subjectivity. Most empirical studies in this field originate from Anglophone countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom. This research offers a critical feminist contribution from a Southern European context, enriching the transnational understanding of affective regimes by foregrounding cultural specificities and ambivalent forms of dissent. Lastly, this study does not aim to speak for the women

who participated, but to co-create a space where their emotional tensions can be heard in their complexity. Drawing on critical theory and feminist epistemology, the analysis seeks not to simplify or resolve these tensions, but to trace how they are felt, narrated, and occasionally unsettled. It is in the gaps—between what is felt, what is expected, and what can be spoken—that possibilities for affective reconfiguration begin to emerge.

Conclusions

This study has shown that the emotional distress described by many young women cannot be adequately understood through clinical or psychopathological categories alone. Rather than emerging from individual dysfunction, these experiences reflect a cultural landscape in which positivity, resilience, and emotional self-regulation are moralized as personal duties. The neoliberal “ideal self”—efficient, emotionally competent, grateful, and always improving—operates not only as an external model but as an internalized affective lens through which many young women judge their worth and interpret their emotional lives.

One of the most striking findings of this research is that distress does not disappear under this affective regime; it is silenced, reframed as personal failure, or aestheticized as something to be quickly managed. Emotions such as sadness, anxiety, or exhaustion are rarely recognized as valid responses to structural pressures—instead, they are treated as signs of weakness, lack of gratitude, or poor self-management. Neoliberalism thus governs not only behavior, but also affect, desire, and the frameworks through which emotions are made (in)visible.

Located within the sociopolitical context of post-pandemic Spain—marked by youth precarity, pressure to self-optimize, and the digitization of emotional life—this study proposes reframing distress not as a personal shortcoming, but as a symptom of an unsustainable affective economy. Crucially, this does not mean dismissing individual agency or the value of personal coping resources, but contextualizing emotional suffering within broader regimes of normativity and self-demand.

Still, the findings also point to cracks in this logic. Several participants voiced their emotional exhaustion and articulated subtle, ambivalent refusals: saying no, slowing down, crying in public, or admitting not to be okay. These gestures—though small and often interrupted by guilt—can be read as affective dissent, challenging the idea that strength and composure are always desirable. To resist the mandate of strength is not to collapse, but to affirm other ways of being: more porous, fragile, and real.

Listening to these voices is not only an academic exercise—it is an ethical and political task. It demands that we question dominant definitions of well-being that frame distress as failure, and instead recognize emotional discomfort as a potential sign of dissonance with the prevailing affective order. From this perspective, suffering becomes not something to correct, but something to hear and think with.

These findings raise important questions for practice. How can educational and clinical institutions avoid reproducing cultures of emotional performance? What would it mean to support emotional life without moralizing it? And how might we create spaces—both public and private—where fragility is not punished, but received with care, legitimacy, and collective meaning?

Ultimately, this study does not seek to close the debate, but to open it. Perhaps the most urgent question is not how to become stronger, more resilient, or more emotionally efficient, but rather:

What other forms of subjectivity, connection, and well-being could emerge if we stopped demanding that we always be okay?

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Personal and affective self-perception

- How would you describe yourself emotionally?
- What kind of expectations do you place on yourself, emotionally or personally?

Relationship with productivity, rest, and value

- How do you feel when you're not being productive?
- What does rest mean to you?
- Do you ever feel guilty about disconnecting?

Emotional distress and self-demand

- Can you describe situations in which you feel overwhelmed, anxious, or not "enough"?
- Where do you think these feelings come from?

Social media and emotional visibility

- How do you feel about sharing your life online?
- Do you feel pressure to show yourself in a certain way?

Discourses of empowerment and emotional management

- What does empowerment mean to you?
- Have you ever felt pressured to be "resilient" or emotionally "strong"?

Resistance and rupture

- Have you ever felt like breaking with those expectations?
- What would "not complying" look like for you?