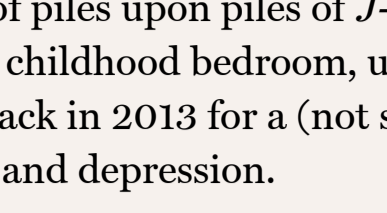


CULTURE

The Best (And Worst) Things I Learnt From 90s Teen Magazines

Chipie trainers, Hard Candy nail polish, first-time sex advice — each page transports you back to a simpler time, but were they a force for good?

By Sara Pollock • 22 April 2021



Born in 1985, I'm a peak millennial who looks back with rose-tinted glasses on the idyllic years of the '90s. Nowadays, escapism, to me, is getting lost in a sea of '90s teen magazines.

My collection – consisting of piles upon piles of *J-17*, *Sugar* and *Bliss* – sat neglected in a corner of my childhood bedroom, undisturbed for many years, until I unwillingly moved back in 2013 for a (not so) brief stint due to a turbulent period of anxiety and depression.

As an independent woman, finding myself part of the 'boomerang' generation was uncomfortable; I felt ashamed, inadequate and weirdly disconnected from modern society. But during my time at home, I rediscovered the sacred magazine collection of my younger self.

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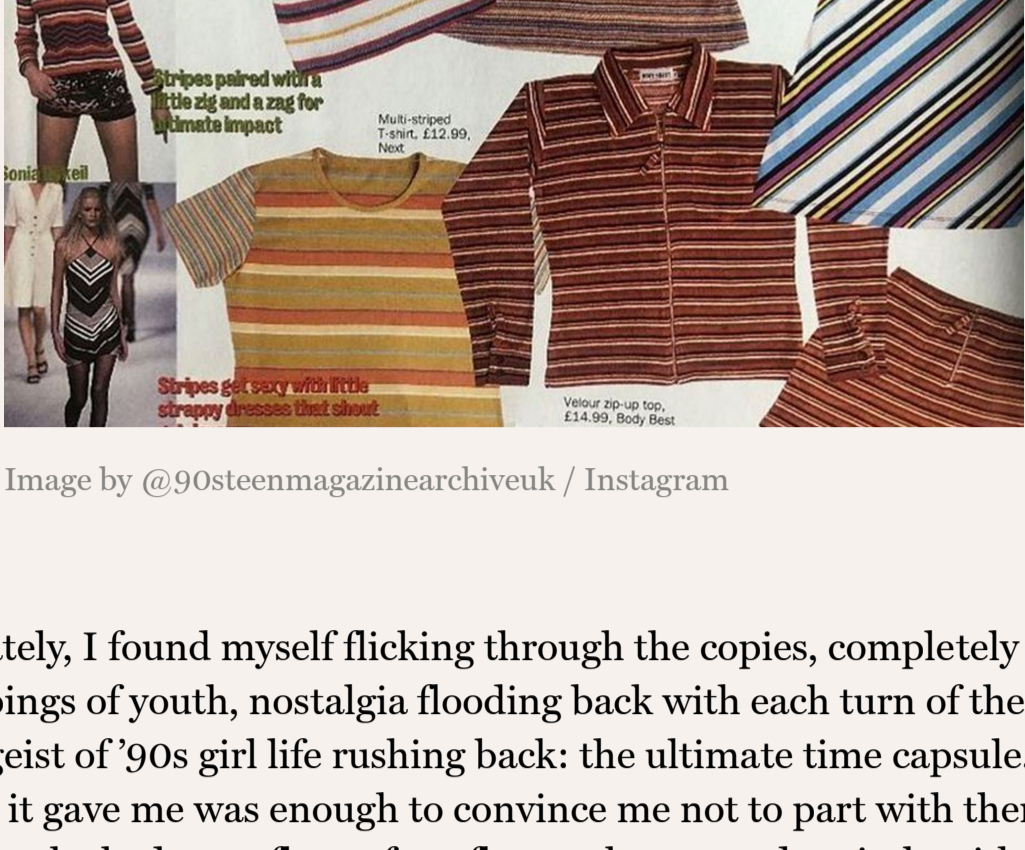


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Immediately, I found myself flicking through the copies, completely lost in the trappings of youth, nostalgia flooding back with each turn of the page. The zeitgeist of '90s girl life rushing back: the ultimate time capsule. The sheer joy it gave me was enough to convince me not to part with them on eBay. Now the bedroom floor of my flat can be covered entirely with the hundreds of issues I own. It's quite impressive.

I found solace in teen magazines at a young age. It was 1995, and I hadn't even reached my tenth birthday when I first picked one up. The content, full of dating and first-time sex advice, was wildly inappropriate. However, devouring features about new make-up and fashion editorials with baby-doll tees was all I needed.

I'd tear out the pages with the items I pined for, usually beauty products; during these years I amassed a large lip balm and nail polish collection. Miss Selfridge's make-up range and Spectacular nail polish was the way to my heart.

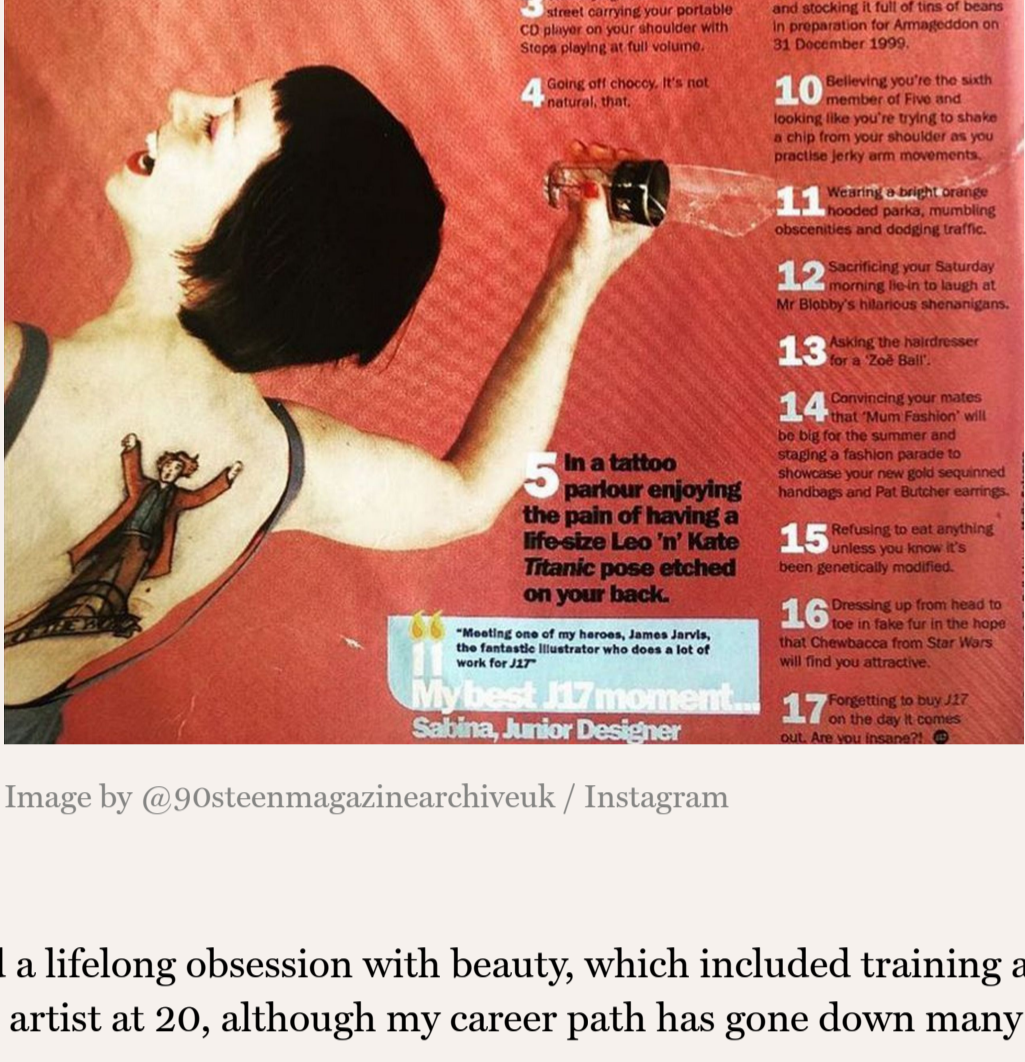


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It ignited a lifelong obsession with beauty, which included training as a make-up artist at 20, although my career path has gone down many routes since then.

Poring over glossy photos of Chipie trainers, PVC A-line skirts, neon feather boas and mini backpacks got my blood racing and helped me envision my future self. In these fantasies, I'd grow up to be the successful editor-in-chief of one of these magazines. The type of woman with a desk drawer filled with Hard Candy nail polish and invitations to events every night of the week.

'There's a self-soothing aspect to reconnecting with the media that we consumed obsessively during our formative years.'

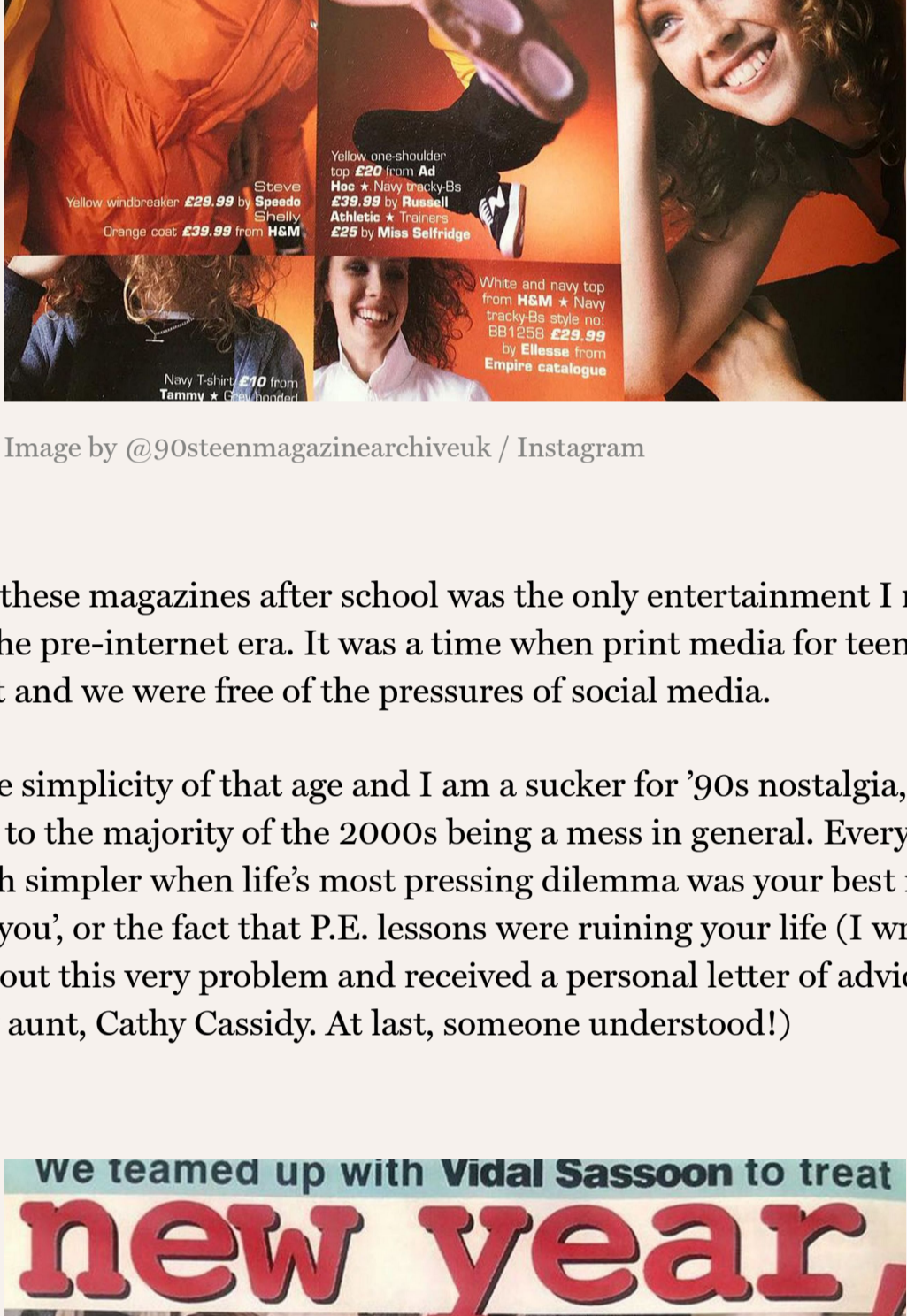


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Reading these magazines after school was the only entertainment I needed back in the pre-internet era. It was a time when print media for teens was at its height and we were free of the pressures of social media.

I miss the simplicity of that age and I am a sucker for '90s nostalgia, which I attribute to the majority of the 2000s being a mess in general. Everything was much simpler when life's most pressing dilemma was your best mate 'copying you', or the fact that P.E. lessons were ruining your life (I wrote to *Shout* about this very problem and received a personal letter of advice from its agony aunt, Cathy Cassidy. At last, someone understood!)

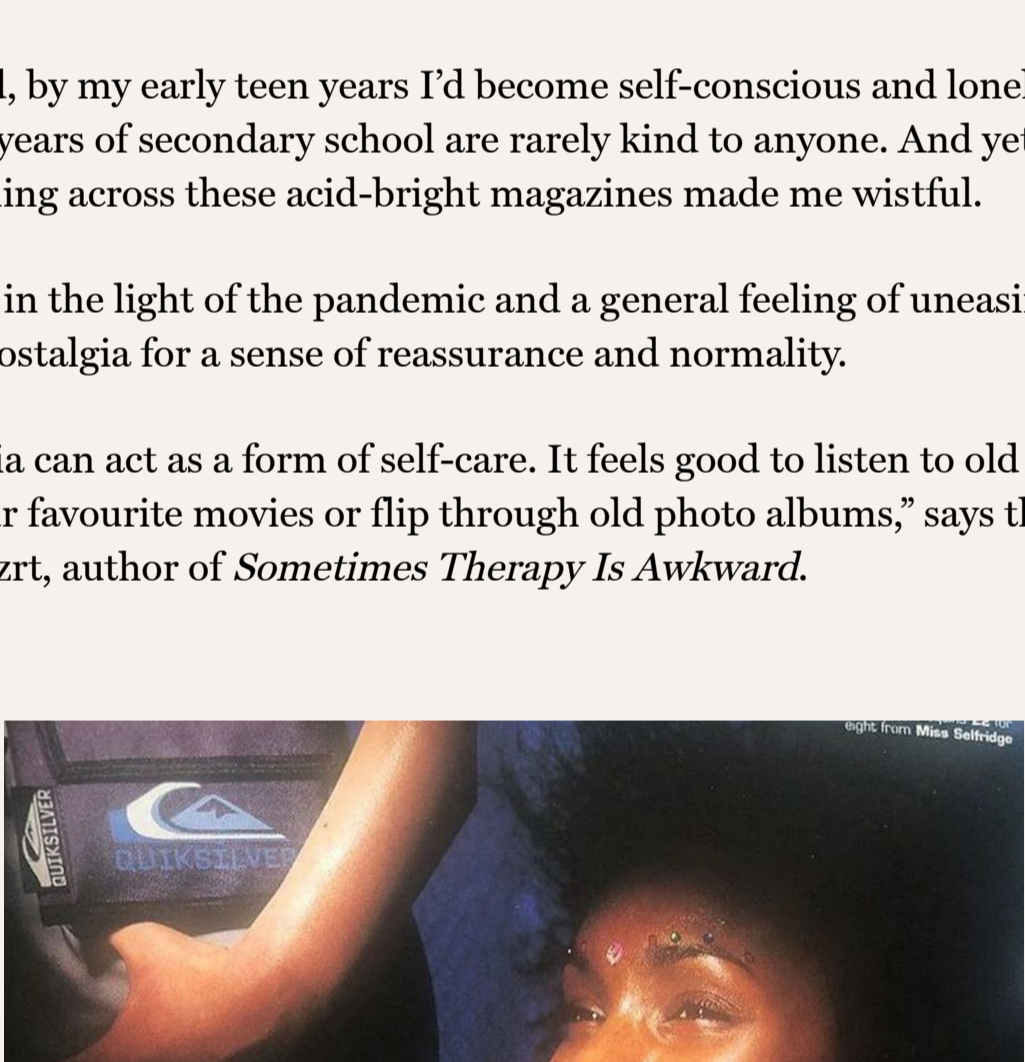


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That said, by my early teen years I'd become self-conscious and lonely: the first few years of secondary school are rarely kind to anyone. And yet despite this, coming across these acid-bright magazines made me wistful.

Perhaps, in the light of the pandemic and a general feeling of uneasiness, we rely on nostalgia for a sense of reassurance and normality.

"Nostalgia can act as a form of self-care. It feels good to listen to old music or watch nostalgic movies or flip through old photo albums," says therapist Nicole Azrzt, author of *Sometimes Therapy Is Awkward*.

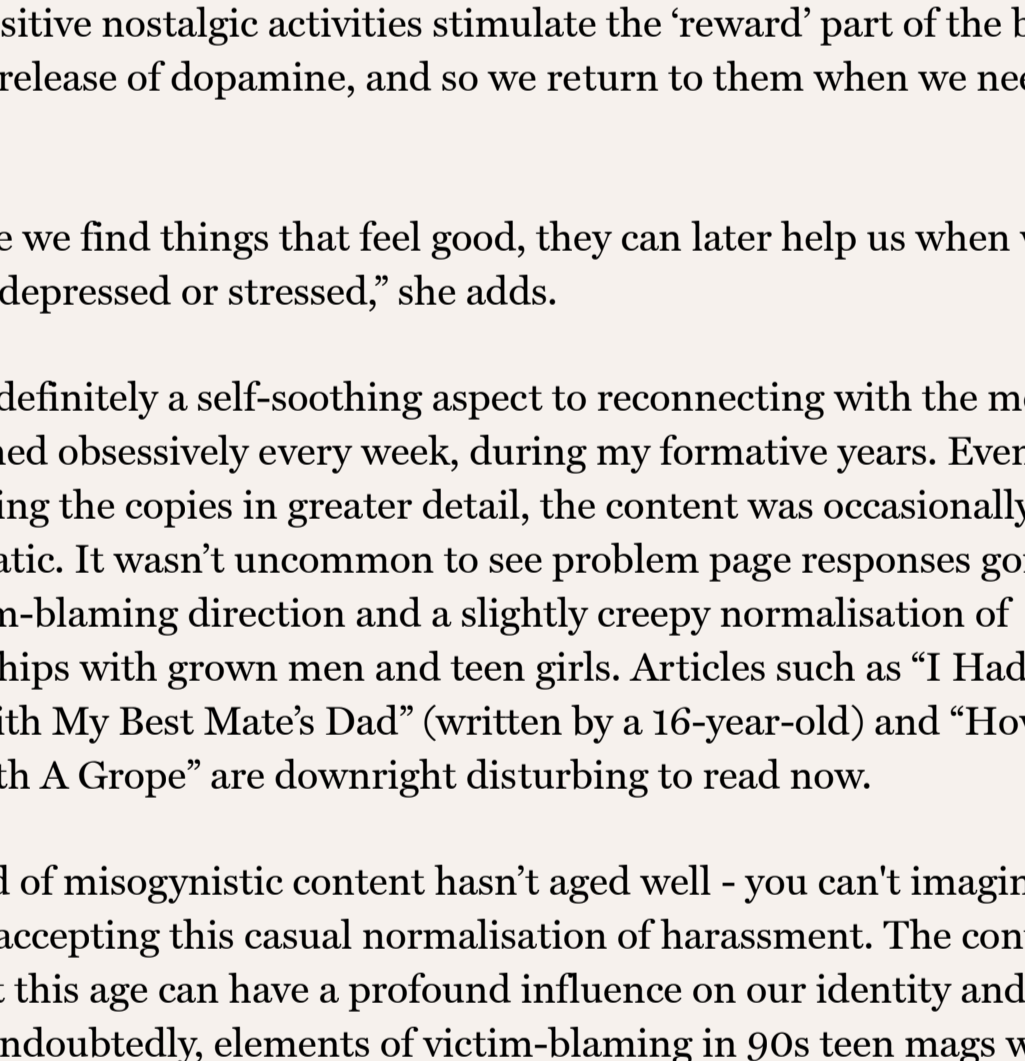


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These positive nostalgic activities stimulate the 'reward' part of the brain with the release of dopamine, and so we return to them when we need comfort.

"Any time we find things that feel good, they can later help us when we feel anxious, depressed or stressed," she adds.

There is definitely a self-soothing aspect to reconnecting with the media that I consumed obsessively every detail, during my formative years. Even if, scrutinising the copies in greater detail, the content was occasionally problematic. It wasn't uncommon to see problem page responses going in the victim-blaming direction and a slightly creepy normalisation of relationships with grown men and teen girls. Articles such as "I Had An Affair With My Best Mate's Dad" (written by a 16-year-old) and "How To Cope With A Grope" are downright disturbing to read now.

This kind of misogynistic content hasn't aged well - you can't imagine teens of today accepting this casual normalisation of harassment. The content we absorb at this age can have a profound influence on our identity and self worth. Undoubtedly, elements of victim-blaming in 90s teen mags would have had a negative impact on a generation of young women (remember hearing the term "slag" echoing through the school corridors?), contributing to a toxic culture that normalises harassment, one that we are still trying to dismantle today.

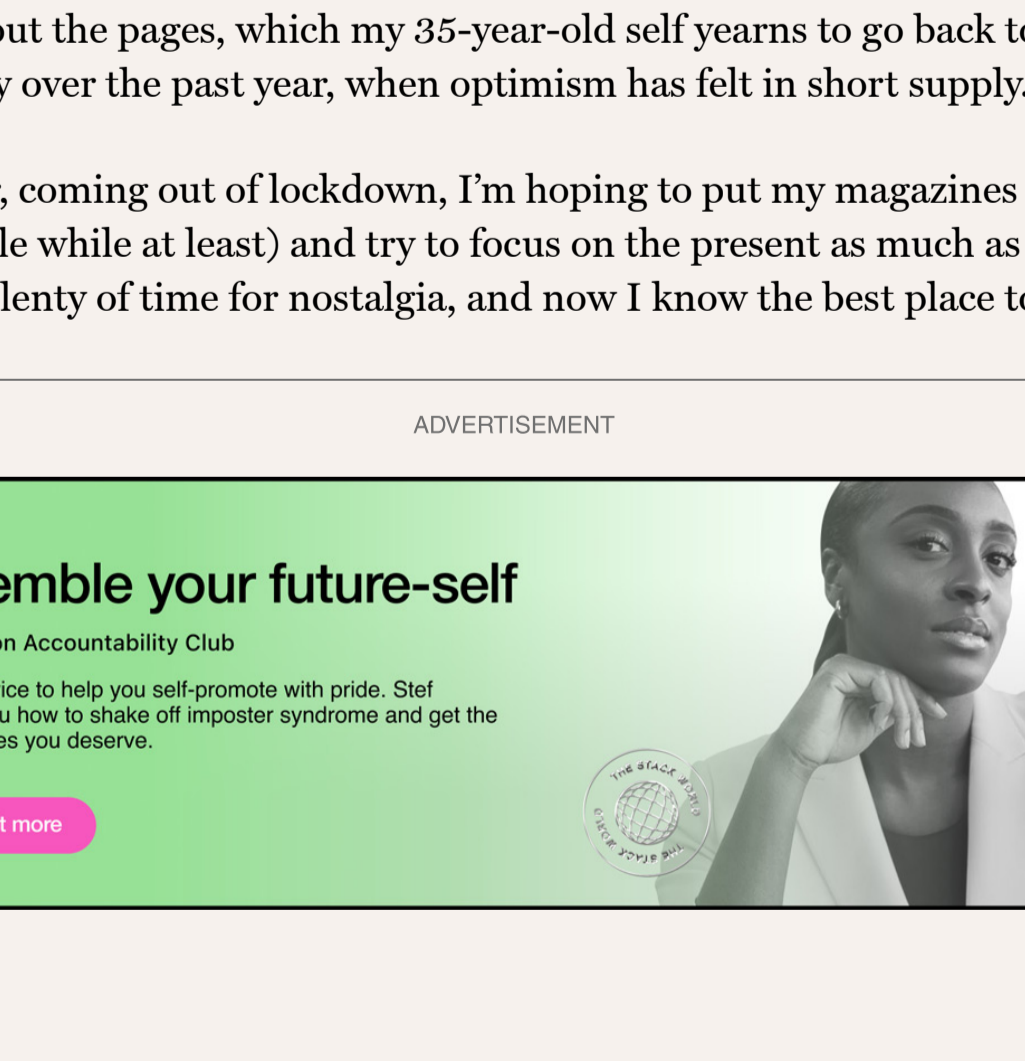


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Questionable agony aunt advice aside, there is youthful optimism throughout the pages, which my 35-year-old self yearns to go back to, especially over the past year, when optimism has felt in short supply.

However, coming out of lockdown, I'm hoping to put my magazines down (for a little while at least) and try to focus on the present as much as possible. There's plenty of time for nostalgia, and now I know the best place to find it.

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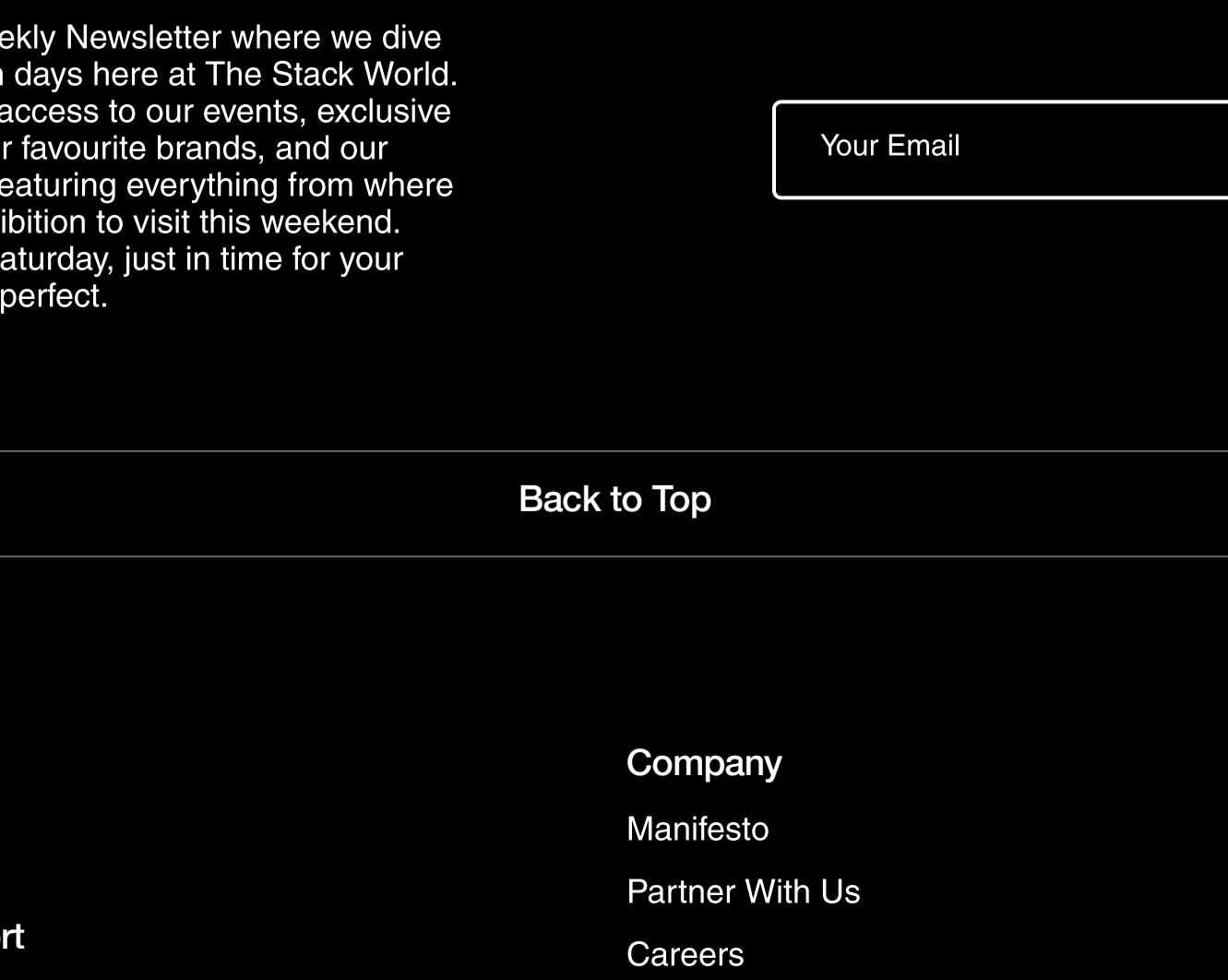
The Short Stack

Nostalgia brings us comfort, even if we have a rose-tinted view of the past.



By Sara Pollock

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