SAD AFFECTS AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S MEDIA:

DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND NEOLIBERAL (POST)FEMINISM IN THE POST-

RECESSIONARY WEST

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Sad Affects and Contemporary Women's Media: Depression, Anxiety, and Neoliberal

(Post)Feminism in the Post-Recessionary West

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This dissertation examines discourses of mental illness and sadness in women's media culture during 2008-2018. It shows that there was an increase in conversations around mental illness in popular culture and on social media from 2015 and onwards. To understand what this increase looked like I examined three sites – women's magazines, female celebrities, and social media – as purveyors of scripts for how we come to think about and experience mental health and illness. I conducted a textual analysis of the mental health coverage in the online editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue*; a discourse analysis of first-hand confessions of mental illness by female celebrities; and online ethnography of communities that focus on these issues on social media.

This multi-methods approach revealed a multifaceted mental health awareness. *Cosmopolitan* tended to approach mental illness in a distanced and tongue-in-cheek way that acknowledges difficult topics but never veers too far into uncomfortable territory, exemplifying the "relatable" self that upholds the feeling rules of neoliberalism (Kanai, 2017; Gill and Kanai, 2018). *Teen Vogue*, in contrast, adopted a straightforward and earnest tone and frequently made connections between mental health and structural

inequalities, with a recurring concern to provide support to their readers around issues of mental health. Among celebrities, my research shows that there was a move from media speculation about the state of female stars' mental health, to them speaking out about diagnoses and experiences themselves. Here, increased confessions and firsthand accounts of living with mental illness can be traced to a larger shift in marketing strategies towards more relatability and intimacy. On social media, young women write about their sadness and mental illness diagnoses in a variety of ways. For some sad girl figures, the feeling-rules of neoliberalism are promoted. Others contest them explicitly while others are seeking precarious forms of solidarity. Regardless of the platforms, there is a key tension that runs through sad girl aesthetics and communities: there is a risk here of glorifying sadness and mental illness, but paradoxically in the very act of sharing one's feelings online one also learns that one is not alone.

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DEDICATION

To all the sad girls out there –

You will make it through

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 2020s, sad affects and mental health awareness are at the forefront of popular media culture. From the music streaming service Spotify's wide range of playlists tailored for sad moods (with titles like "Sad Bops," "Down in the Dumps" and "All the feels"), the US premium cable channel HBO adding mental health disclaimers to shows that depict particular ailments (Thorne, 2019), British royal Prince Harry participating in the launch of a mental health app to aid military service members (Young, 2020b), and one of the biggest pop stars of the moment being Billie Eilish, an 18-year-old girl who makes sad, dark songs while openly talking about her own struggles with depression (Eells, 2019).

The presence of sadness and mental illness awareness in mainstream public culture is a fairly recent phenomenon. As recently as 2017, pop star Selena Gomez explained her choice to be open about her struggles with anxiety and depression by saying: "We girls, we're taught to be almost too resilient, to be strong and sexy and cool and laid-back … We also need to feel allowed to fall apart" (Vogue.com, 2017). The indirect proposition here was that it was out of the ordinary to speak about such issues in public, and that the general expectation of young women is that they show strength and flexibility at all costs. Along with Gomez's statement, the last decade has seen an increase in representations and conversations about mental health in popular culture at large. Popular magazines and digital publications are regularly covering issues like depression and anxiety. Countless listicles of celebrities that have opened up about their struggles with mental illness have appeared (Pugachevsky, 2014; Shah, 2016). And scripted characters with various psychic ailments pop up across the TV and movie

landscape (Kliegman, 2015). On social media platforms like Tumblr and Instagram young people are self-identifying with the moniker "sad girl," inhabiting a position that places negative feelings at the forefront.

This dissertation examines the increased visibility of mental illness and sadness by studying gendered discourses around depression and anxiety from 2008 to 2018. It does so by focusing on three sites – women's magazines, female celebrities, and social media – as purveyors of scripts for how we come to think about and experience mental health and illness.

FRAMEWORK

Drawing on the work of Rosalind Gill (2007, 2016), Christina Scharff (2016b), Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker (Negra & Tasker, 2014) and others, I situate the increased visibility of mental illness against a backdrop of a neoliberal and postfeminist culture that privileges individualism and personal choice, placing the responsibility for happiness and wellbeing solely on the individual. This culture privileges the positive and energetic while dismissing pain, injury, and failure (Ahmed 2010; Gill & Orgad, 2015; Davies, 2015). I look at these contemporary iterations of mental illness specifically in relation to gender, following thinkers who define women as ideal neoliberal subjects (Gill, 2007, 2008; Scharff, 2016a; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Women in particular are hailed as subjects of capacity that have the potential for great success if they just work hard enough on themselves. Depression, however, is associated with debility and the incapacity to act.

Feminist scholars have also written about the psychic life of neoliberalism and postfeminism (Gill, 2017; Scharff, 2016b), paying attention to how contemporary media culture focuses increasingly on the psychological, calling on subjects to work on not only their bodies and careers but also on their moods and attitudes. The feelings that are privileged here tend to be positive ones: confidence (Gill & Orgad, 2015), empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2018b), shamelessness (Dobson, 2015), and resilience (Kanai, 2019). Attention has also started to be given to the appearance of negative affects in this otherwise positive emotional landscape. Examples of this include Amy Shields Dobson and Akane Kanai's (2018) study of affective dissonances in post-recessional television shows aimed at young women, Shani Orgad and Gill's (2019) exploration of mediated female rage in the #MeToo era, and Helen Wood's (2019) examination of the prevalence of the word "fuck" in contemporary feminist speech. These analyses present a complicated affective landscape. The presence of affective dissonances may be read as a problematization of the "accessibility and appeal of highly individualist career-oriented lifestyles idealised in cultural mythologies of powerful "can-do" girls" (Dobson and Kanai, 2018, p. 1). But in other instances female rage enters the mediated public sphere only to be "simultaneously contained and disavowed" (Orgad and Gill, 2019, p. 596). And in yet another figuration, the repeated use of "fuck" might signal an irreverent feminist rage that rejects respectability politics along the lines of gender, race, class and sexuality, in an ultimately hopeful way (Wood, 2019). My dissertation adds to this growing field by looking at the appearance of negative feminine affects related to mental health and wellbeing in women's magazines, among female celebrities, and on social media.

The sites of study

Women's magazines have long functioned as guides for women and girls that model how to live life in the most ideal or proper way. Angela McRobbie writes in her classic study of the girls' magazine *Jackie* that publications in this genre "define and shape the woman's world, spanning every stage from early childhood to old age [where] the exact nature of the woman's role is spelt out in detail, according to her age and status" (2000, p. 69, orig. 1977). One aspect of this guidance was the supportive function provided by these magazines, where experts answered questions about everything from relationship to medical problems.

For a long time, women's magazines were a stable fixture of the media landscape, with various outlets aimed at specific niche segments of the female audience (like working mothers, sophisticated black women, fashion-forward twenty-somethings, and so on) (Duffy, 2013, p. 3). Since the start of the 21st century and the rise of digital media, however, women's magazines have struggled with declining revenues as advertisers and readers move to free online platforms (Duffy, 2013, p. 3). The traditional magazines still hold the role of advice givers but celebrities, influencers, and peer networks on social media have also stepped into that role and now function as similar guiding lights. This project thus looks at three sites – magazines, celebrities and social media networks – to understand the contemporary discourse around gendered mental health. I understand these various media sites as actively defining what it means to suffer from depression and anxiety, as well as providing solutions for how to deal with these ailments.

Within the frames for this project I define the contemporary moment as the period from 2008 to the end of 2018, with an understanding that the cultural and social

landscape in the West was significantly affected by the 2008 financial crisis and the

subsequent bank bailouts and austerity measures. The financial recession can be read as

the starting point for the current precarious state of life in the West. I place the cut-off of

this moment at the end of 2018 so as to make the project manageable. As I conclude this

project in the spring of 2020, the world is in the middle of the COVID-19 public health

crisis, another global event that surely will affect the state of our lives for a long time to

come. What is already obvious is the extent to which the media we consume in our

everyday life function not only as information suppliers, but also very much as nodes of

support in uncertain times. As people all over the world are stuck inside, many turn to

friends as well as celebrities on social media to stay connected and get support. The study

of how various media shape our understanding of mental health is in this sense of

heightened relevance as the world encounters the new normal of a post-COVID-19

world.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This project examines the contemporary structure of feeling (Williams, 1977) that

produces these increased representations of mental illness. I ask how female subjects are

hailed as mentally ill in various mediated spaces. My analysis is focused on depression

and anxiety, as terms referring both to medicalized discourses of control and

psychosocial affects like vulnerability, sadness, and melancholia.

My project adds to the understanding of the changing media landscape of advice

giving, from magazines to celebrities and peers on social media. It contributes to the field

of feminist media studies by studying the entanglement of emotions and popular feminism.

The key research questions guiding this project fall into two categories, first a set of questions concerning the gendered effects of neoliberalism regarding health:

What do the contemporary conversations around mental health look like in feminine/female dominated media spaces? What definitions and solutions are provided? And how do the discourses around these sad affects relate to an otherwise upbeat and positive media culture? What does it mean that a culture that tends to privilege the positive now is making way for talk of mental illnesses like depression and anxiety? Are we seeing a repudiation of the "happiness industry" or is it merely another side of the same coin? What happens with the infinitely capable neoliberal subject when she acknowledges weakness?

And a second set of questions referring to the role of digital media platforms in these processes:

What meanings and connections emerge in digital spaces when women share their experiences of mental illness with each other there? Do the definitions shared contribute new and more spacious ways of feeling bad? And what potential for change in perceptions around mental illness do these discourses provide?

These questions take a critical approach to media culture by interrogating how meanings are produced around issues of mental health. But I am also following scholars like Sarah Projansky (2014), who "draws on a feminist media studies methodology in pursuit of optimistic anti-racist queer readings" (p. 21) of representations of girlhood. In my research I have looked for potentially subversive aspects in portrayals of depression and anxiety. Here I have also taken into account the often unequal representation of who suffers from mental illness. A certain kind of girl sadness is often associated with white and thin bodies (Alderton, 2018, pp. 106-107) and the expressions of sadness and pain that received the most attention online during the time period I examine has been

criticized for only referring to white women.[1] But the online discourse around mental

health also includes conversations that question exclusionary representations of what it

means to suffer psychically. Examples include artist and mental health advocate Dior

Vargas' "People of Color And Mental Illness Photo Project" which was started in 2014 to

raise awareness about mental health in communities of color (DiorVargas.com) and Sad

Girls Club, an Instagram account and in person meetup group that focuses specially on

the experience of women of color living with mental illness (sadgirlsclub.org). *Teen

Vogue* also publishes pieces about the connection between mental health and structural

inequalities from time to time (see Harvard, 2015; Sinay, 2016a; and McNamara, 2017b).

It is particularly within the online spaces that I have found what resembles

subversive portrayals of living with depression and anxiety. I discuss the activity by some

of the sad girls on Tumblr and Instagram with the scholarly activist collective *Institute for

Precarious Consciousness*'s (2014) notion of a "precarity-focused consciousness raising"

to move out from under the debilitating grip of anxiety, which they define as the

dominant affect of the contemporary moment.

One of the indirect questions for this project has also been whether or not the

mere presence of mental health awareness constitutes a challenge to a culture focused on

happiness and success. In other words, is it automatically a "good" thing to talk more

about depression, anxiety, and other issues that affect our psyches? The short answer is

no. It is important to remember that several of the conversations around mental health

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[1] A piece aptly titled "All Alone in their White Girl Pain" (Farah, 2020) circulated online in August 2020, that made some poignant remarks about the acritical and exclusionary aspects of white sad girls. Among these were that the sad girl subject position was always only available for white girls to inhabit, and that the pleasure that people like Lana del Rey derive from being victimized is only truly pleasurable to those who have not actually been victimized.

that are now occurring more out in the open than in previous times still exist within neoliberal societies where the goal is to produce good laboring subjects. In relation to the mental health app promoted by British Royal Prince Harry mentioned above, for example, the goal is to help "military personnel cope with mental health problems" (Young, 2020b). This serves to produce individuals working in the military who are not only physically but also mentally fit, which can be read as a way to influence soldiers to become more efficient and high performing. Such is the complexity of mental health awareness - it is rarely an easy either or of "good" versus "bad" awareness, but instead a nuanced web of elements that conform to existing power structures.

A historical lineage of sad and mad women

Women's affective states have a long history of being pathologized under names like neurasthenia, hysteria, and schizophrenia (Appignanesi, 2007; Chesler, 2005; Showalter, 1985). In culture, the sad and mad woman has appeared as various popular figures: the Victorian madwoman, the hysteric, the schizophrenic, and the Prozac-consuming American woman of the 1990s, to name a few.

The Victorian madwoman was most notably represented in culture by the Shakespearian character Ophelia (Showalter, 1985). Various interpretations of this figure circulated in the contemporary cultural imaginary, but most of them had in common a view of Ophelia as innocent and fragile. This was reflective of a change in the attitude toward, and treatment of, the mentally ill at the turn of the 19th century. The view of the insane went from being one of sensational disgust to protective pity and the symbol of madness shifted from repulsive madman to appealing madwoman.

It is also in relation to the Victorian view of madness that feminist interpretations of fictional madwomen as points of empowering identification emerged. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979, 2nd ed 2000) is perhaps the most famous work to argue such a stance. They identified a recurring theme of psychological ailments in women's nineteenth century writing and read the narratives of madness as ways in which the authors could symbolically act out a refusal of patriarchal norms. The character on the page functioned as the author's double, enabling her to express dissatisfaction and rage at the conventions she had limited capacities to protest in everyday life.

Hysteria is one of the psychological ailments most connected to the female gender in the historical Western cultural imaginary, the word itself derived from the Greek and Latin word for uterus or womb, reflecting the long held notion that it was caused by the female reproductive organs (Didi-Huberman, 2003, p. 68). The neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot was the primary researcher of the ailment in 19th century Europe. His methods had a highly visual and performative element to them – with patients being hypnotized to display hysteric symptoms in front of an audience, as well as photographed and presented to the wider public in book form (Didi-Huberman, 2003). One of the most frequently portrayed patients was 15-year old Augustine who became a celebrity hysteric. The sensational and performative nature of Augustine's case made her more into a cultural figure than an individual person. She was and is the prime example of nineteenth century hysteria, an icon of this stage in the "mythology of madness" (Showalter, 1985, 1997).

Charcot's public lectures about hysteria were attended by a range of influential people at the time, one of them being Sigmund Freud, who famously went on to establish

the practice and science of psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

century. In its infancy, psychoanalysis was used primarily to treat hysteric women, with

the case of Bertha Pappenheim (known under the pseudonym Anna O.) as one of the

most influential examples included in Freud and Joseph Breuer's seminal book *Studies on*

Hysteria (1966, orig. 1895). Pappenheim has been described as actively participating in

the development of the "talking cure" of psychoanalysis and in Freud and Breuer's

analysis part of her mental troubles stemmed from the constraints imposed on her by the

patriarchal orthodoxy of her father (Showalter, 1985, pp. 155-157). Freud abandoned the

view of hysteria as caused by cultural constraints imposed on women in the 1920s and

1930s in favor of essentialist theories of gender that largely saw "feminine psychology as

a defective version of masculine psychic development" (Showalter, 1985, p. 200).

Something that Elaine Showalter (1985) describes as a response to contemporary

feminism which functioned as a backlash against the advances made by women during

World War I.

This speaks to the relation between the specific pathologizations of women and

contemporary gender relations. Susan Bordo (2003, orig. 1993) has written significantly

about anorexia and other eating disorders in Western culture, diseases that primarily

affect women and that arose as particularly prominent in the 1980s and 1990s. Eating

disorders might take their most visible form on the physical body, but they are firmly

rooted in the mind, and thus belong to the "family" of psychopathologies. Bordo's (2003)

analysis is rooted in Foucauldian theories of how power/knowledge structures come to

discipline the body and psyche down to the level of influencing the process of

subjectivation. In that vein she argues that "the escalation of eating disorders into a

significant social phenomenon arises at the intersection of patriarchal culture and post-industrial capitalism" (2003, p. 32). Eating disorders, then, are strongly connected to the social and cultural context in which they are found. Bordo further argues that anorexia is not an individual expression of a pathology, but "a remarkably overdetermined *symptom* of some of the multifaceted and heterogeneous distresses of our age" (2003, p. 141, italicization in original). Bordo's approach provides a useful model for how to analyze psychopathologies in relation to the patriarchal and capitalist systems in which they are formed.

In the 1960s the cultural icon of female madness was the schizophrenic, a diagnosis that has been described as offering "a remarkable example of the cultural conflation of femininity and insanity" (Showalter, 1985, p. 204). One famous representative was writer Sylvia Plath, whose fictional work *The Bell Jar* (1963) inspired many feminist readings of the protagonist as breaking down under the pressures of patriarchal society. With Plath's real life following a very similar trajectory, and ending in suicide at age 30, she was established as an icon of contemporary female madness.

In the early 1990s the anti-depressant drug Prozac was introduced to the mainstream medical market and narratives of pill-popping women appeared in multiple cultural contexts. One of the most visible stories here was Elizabeth Wurtzel's autobiography *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* (1994) which was subsequently turned into a feature film. The young woman on anti-depressants became the embodiment of female madness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Metzl, 2001).

Historically women's sad experiences have been classified as pathologies leading to institutionalization and confinement. In the contemporary moment, they tend to be medicalized within a biochemical discourse that reverts to (deinstitutionalized) psychotropic drugs and psychotherapy as solutions. In this way, the current pathologization of women's sad experiences takes place within a neoliberal framework that does not position them as abject and (completely) other, but instead renders them intelligible within a larger culture of self-help in which the individual is responsible for her own wellbeing (Franssen, 2020; Johnson, 2008; Rose, 1998). In this framework, all ties between health and structures of inequality are severed, and any attempts at politicizing widespread ill health are thwarted. This dissertation shows that this mode of thinking about mental health is dominant, but not all-encompassing in contemporary popular culture. There are several sites where ties between mental wellbeing and larger power structures are being made, most explicitly in *Teen Vogue* and among the sad girls on Instagram.

The emergence of 21st century sadness

One of the arguments I make in this project is that the figure of the sad girl emerged as an indirect response to a media culture that required women in particular to be strong, empowered, and confident. The first example of this is the artist Lana del Rey and the splash she made when she debuted with a homemade video for the song "Video Games" in late 2011. The video went viral and she became famous overnight, and when her debut album *Born to Die* was released in January 2012 it topped the charts in eleven countries including France, the UK, and Australia. But alongside the hype and popularity

came an onslaught of criticism and vitriol from both Internet users and mainstream media outlets like the *New York Times* (Vigier, 2012, p. 2). The music video for the song "Video Games" is a mash-up of 1950s Hollywood aesthetics, boys on skateboards, a drunk and stumbling woman being helped to a car, palm trees, the iconic L.A. hotel Chateau Marmont and del Rey herself looking sultry with plump lips and her hair made up in a 1960s beehive. The song is ostensibly about a girl very much in love with a boy who likes to play video games and giving her all to be with him, with the chorus going "It's you, it's you, it's all for you / Everything I do / I tell you all the time / Heaven is a place on Earth with you". The song and video, together with the following single "Born to Die" and the album with the same title emphasized submissiveness and a tendency towards self-destructive behavior. These sentiments stood in stark contrast to the refrain of self-empowerment that dominated pop at the time.[2] One music journalist described it as follows:

> "Nowhere else in mass culture have young people, especially women, been allowed to feel so unvexed about their desires, even if those desires are constrained to the relatively superficial, glitter-sprayed longings of a Ke$ha rager: 'We're taking control/We've got what we want/We do what you don't.'" (Schrodt, 2012)

The problem with del Rey, argued the same journalist, is that she "sings as a woman who doesn't know what she wants," which was why she appeared as a provocation to some. NPR's music critic Ann Powers argued that del Rey's "persona relies on classic femme fatale allure, but without the usual "girl power" update … So women find her troubling; she embodies the worst part of being a girl" (Powers, 2012). In the pop cultural climate of

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[2] One YouTube user even commented in March of 2020 that "This is revolutionary. Now these [sic] kind of music is common thanks to Lana. Came at a time when we had party music during school. This changed the entire music scenario" (Alisa03, 2020).

the time, del Rey's passivity and sadness was upsetting in its turn away from

(post)feminist can-do spirit. Media studies scholar Catherine Vigier provided the

following analysis at the time:

"One of the problems is that, after a decade in which women were told that they had everything it took to get ahead, and that the playing-field was somehow level in our new, post-feminist world, it was disturbing to many to see a woman recast herself as an old-fashioned male fantasy and to seemingly embrace submissiveness, and to dress as if she were nostalgic for the days before women's liberation." (Vigier, 2012, p. 4)

For Vigier, one of the main draws of del Rey was that she spoke for the women who felt

left out of the empowerment feminism of the day and gave "expression to some of the

profound dissatisfactions that women continue to feel" (2012, p. 3). This interpretation is

similar to what artist Audrey Wollen expressed a few years later when she proposed a

"Sad Girl Theory" to reconceptualize female sadness as a form of protest through images

posted on her Instagram account (Watson, 2015). For Wollen, women sharing

photographs of themselves crying or otherwise publicly displaying their sadness should

not be seen as expressions of weakness, but should instead be interpreted as modes of

dissent in a patriarchal world that requires women to smile.

This is not to say that del Rey and Wollen were the inventors or originators of this

kind of sad expression, rather they exist in the long lineage of sad women mentioned

above. But they are examples of a more recent kind of sad aesthetic that very much also

took shape online. Zoe Alderton (2018), who writes about the contemporary aesthetics of

self-harm, describes it as "a newer kind of 'Sad' Aesthetic [that] has come exclusively

from the internet generation and new modes of mass communication" (p.64). She locates

this aesthetic as especially connected to the social media platform Tumblr and the

"Tumblr Teen Girl Aesthetic" which is "both powerfully emotive and deeply ironic" (Alderton, 2018, p. 64).Important to note here is that the girls associated with this kind of sad expression tend to be white and thin (Alderton, 2018; Farah, 2020).

This dissertation explores how this sad aesthetic has spread from the lesser known corners of the internet and into popular culture at large. In addition to a higher presence of sad songs among the top charts,[3] my research shows that there was an increase in magazine coverage of depression/anxiety and celebrity confessions of living with mental illness from 2015 and onwards (see graphs 1 and 4). I am not arguing that there was a straight line of causation or influence from Internet subculture to the mainstream, rather I want to call attention to a general turn to sadness on multiple levels of popular culture.

This new visibility surrounding issues of mental illness takes multiple forms. On the one hand there is an awareness of diagnoses and different conditions in ways that seek to normalize issues as common and "just like any other disease." Discourses in this vein largely try to present depression and anxiety in easily digestible and non-threatening ways, following Akane Kanai's (2017a, 2017b) work on "affectively relatable" online selves that touch upon difficult subjects but do so with self-deprecating humor that serves to defuse the seriousness of the problems. These representations are found largely in *Cosmopolitan's* coverage of mental illness, among celebrities and microcelebrities, and in some of the more commercial "sad girl" accounts on social media.

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[3] A 2018 study from researchers at the University of California at Irvine analyzed 500,000 popular songs released in the UK between 1985 to 2015 and classified them according to mood, showing that there was "a clear downward trend in 'happiness' and 'brightness', as well as a slight upward trend in 'sadness'", indicating that mainstream music has become statistically sadder (Interiano, Kazemi, Wang, Yang, Yu, and Komarova, 2018).

But then there are also more critical accounts where mental wellbeing is presented as a more complex issue and frequently connected to power structures and inequality. As this dissertation will demonstrate, these accounts are largely found in *Teen Vogue*, whose contemporary branding attempts to construct girls and young women as political subjects with agency (Coulter and Moruzi, 2020) and among the more radical sad girls on Instagram who tend to critique the US mental health care system and the state of capitalism.

Another aspect of the heightened visibility of mental health is the increased intimacy of celebrity and influencer culture. Traditional celebrities are becoming more ordinary and tend to open up more about their personal lives to create and maintain strong connections with fans, while "regular" people turn into microcelebrities by building intense and intimate connections with followers (Gamson, 2011; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2015). Disclosing a mental illness diagnosis can be a successful way of building up these bonds and often serves to strengthen brands based on authenticity. At the same time the media outlets that provide advice and where women have traditionally turned to for support, like magazines, largely reach audiences via social media feeds that are also filled with content from celebrities, influencers, and peers. In this way the various media spaces blend into each other and all function as nodes of support.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This study presents a feminist media studies analysis of discourses around mental health in popular culture and on social media, using a multi-methods approach that moves

across magazines, celebrities, social media. I employ content and textual analysis of magazines and celebrity performances, and an online ethnography of multiple iterations of the Internet phenomenon of the sad girl.

As mentioned above, the project focuses on three main sites – articles about mental health and illness in two publications aimed at women and girls (*Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue*); female celebrities who have spoken publicly about dealing with depression and anxiety (primarily Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez); and socially mediated expressions of depression, anxiety, and general sadness online (sad girls on Tumblr and Instagram, as well as the specific cases of Audrey Wollen, Sad Girls Y Qué, Sad Girls Club, and My Therapist Says).

With all these materials, I have looked for specific mentions of depression and anxiety, while also taking note of statements that convey related psychosocial affects like vulnerability, sadness, and melancholia without directly naming the diagnoses "depression" and "anxiety." I have asked questions about the way in which depression and anxiety are talked about; who gets to speak about it; what the solutions and responses presented are; and how these conversations relate to power/knowledge structures, whether directly or implicitly.

In addition to Projansky's (2014) "optimistic anti-racist queer readings" (p. 21) of representations of girlhood I also work with Eve Kosofosky Sedgwick's (2003) calls for reparative, rather than paranoid, critical reading. For Sedgwick, critical theory has for too long been invested in a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (2003, p. 125) which analyzes the world in a paranoid way that always aims to uncover a negative or damaging truth. The problem with paranoid reading is that it presumes sinister intentions behind the surface

and that it places ultimate faith in what exposing those intentions might do for the greater good. Sedgwick proposes instead an understanding of paranoia as "one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones" (p. 128), and urges scholars to also engage in reparative readings. A reparative position involves a "seeking of pleasure" (2003, p. 137) and an openness to optimistic readings of a text or situation. In relation to my project, this means looking for potentially subversive or reparative aspects in portrayals of depression and anxiety.

Magazines

I chose *Cosmopolitan* for the study of advice media because it is one of the oldest and most established women's magazines. *Teen Vogue* was selected as a second site because it gained a high profile as a political publication for young teens from 2016 and onwards, during the time I started to realize this project.

Here I searched the websites of Cosmopolitan.com and TeenVogue.com for key words. This resulted in a total of 258 relevant articles in *Cosmopolitan* and 540 in *Teen Vogue*. The articles found here were then compiled into an archive that let me map the increases in quantity of relevant articles throughout the 2008-2018 decade, classify the content of the material into various categories, track the mention of specific diagnoses and use of experts, as well as other metrics discussed in the chapter.

Celebrity culture

When it came to celebrities, I used Google searches and the archives of celebrity reporting outlets to map out 105 female celebrities who had spoken out about various

experiences of mental illness during the 2008-2018 decade (see graph 4 and table 1). These were drawn primarily from compilation articles such as "39 Celebrities Who Have Opened Up About Mental Health" (Roberts, 2018) and "19 Celebrities Who Have Spoken Out About Their Anxiety" (van Eijk, 2015) in a variety of media outlets. I have focused here primarily on US celebrities or those with a global appeal. These were also compiled into an archive that let me track changes in frequency per year and map the various diagnoses cited by the celebrities. The analysis then focuses on two high profile celebrities and examines the discourses around their performances and utterances in relation to mental illness and sadness.

After mapping the extent to which female celebrities had spoken out about mental illness, I chose to home in first on Demi Lovato because she had established herself early on as a mental health advocate, publicly disclosing her bipolar II diagnosis in 2011. Lovato is a celebrity who has successfully incorporated her own struggles into her public persona, by very much putting her issues into the forefront of her brand. She is thus an illustrative example of how conceptions/understandings of mental illness are circulating in mainstream popular culture. The fact that Lovato has been open for so long about her struggles also positions her as an example of how what is publicly acceptable to say and do in relation to issues of mental health have changed. The singer has released two different "tell-all" documentaries about her life, *Demi Lovato: Stay Strong* in 2012 and *Demi Lovato: Simply Complicated* in 2017, both of which function as snapshots of what was considered as appropriate and marketable strategies for talking about mental illness at different points in time.

I choose to also focus on Selena Gomez, who belongs to the same generation of stars as Lovato (they both worked on the children's television show *Barney and Friends* at the same time during the early 2000s), but who did not speak out about her mental health until in 2016, when she publicly disclosed her struggles with depression and anxiety. Importantly, Gomez's struggles were of a different nature than Lovato's, she revealed having gone to rehab for depression and anxiety as a consequence of living with the autoimmune disease Lupus, while Lovato's bipolar II diagnosis was revealed in relation to her substance abuse issues and eating disorder. Even though Gomez's experience of living with the physiological illness lupus makes her situation somewhat exceptional,[4] she frequently talks about depression and anxiety as something common, as in the above quote where she says she wants girls to "feel allowed to fall apart" (Vogue.com, 2017). In the commonness of her appeal to mental health awareness, Gomez is representative of the late-in-the-decade openness about these issues. Another aspect that makes Gomez relevant for my study is the postfeminist appeal of her call to empower women to "feel allowed to fall apart" and her use of "sad aesthetics" in some of her creative work, which follows in the vein of the sad trends found in online spaces. It is in relation to Gomez's employment of a sad aesthetics in her work and the postfeminist aspect of her call for girls to "feel allowed to fall apart" that I then briefly discuss Lana del Rey and her impact on the music scene at the time.

Another factor that has influenced the discourse around celebrities and mental health is the increased ordinariness of celebrity communication with fans that has

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[4] Approximately 1.5 million Americans and 5 million people worldwide live with lupus, compared to 17.3 million Americans living with major depressive disorder and 40 million Americans living with anxiety, making depression and anxiety significantly more common than lupus (Lupus.org, 2016; Dbsalliance.org, 2020; Adaa.org, 2018).

emerged on social media. The establishment of micro-celebrities on digital platforms has been instrumental in modeling the successful integration of intimacy and "backstage access" into the personal branding that traditional celebrities and regular individuals alike are encouraged to engage with in contemporary media culture (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017).

Socially mediated sadness - online ethnography

For the study of socially mediated sadness, I employed a combination of online ethnography and textual analysis to examine the "flow" of sadness and sad girls online. Here I am following Deniz Tunçalp and Patrick L. Lê's (2014) definitions of ways to limit online ethnography. They define three dominant methods employed by online ethnographers to demarcate the area of study - to choose to focus on one single site as a bounded location, to focus on a predetermined set of multiple sites, or to adopt a "flow approach" where thematic and community connections are followed across several sites and platforms without a fixed boundary (Tunçalp and Lê, 2014, p. 63). It is thus this last method I have favored in my study of sadness and sad girls online. Here the primary sites are Tumblr and Instagram, but I also discuss iterations of the sad girl that appear on platforms like Facebook (Sad Girls Y Qué) and as a figure that traverses several different online contexts.

I have been a user and observer of Tumblr since 2010 and my master's thesis was a study of a range of feminist accounts on the site in 2011-2012. In the subsequent years I started to see more and more content displaying a sad aesthetic and using the term sad

girl. As my interest for this phenomenon grew, I followed more and more of these sad

girl accounts.

Like other researchers of Tumblr and its communities have pointed out, the

platform favors fragmented presentations of self without the profiles characteristic of so

many other social networking sites (Renninger, 2014; Seko and Lewis, 2018). Each user

instead has their own Tumblr page that functions also as blog accessible to non-users,

where everything each individual user posts or reblogs (reposts) is collected, often as a "a

long chain of uncontextualized short entries, which may include images, recordings,

links, and text in various combinations" (Fink and Miller, 2014, p. 612). The feed on the

Tumblr dashboard resembles that of other platforms like Instagram and Twitter, in that it

displays the posts of those you follow in a continuously updated flow of content. Most

posts include a link via the users' handles to the original Tumblr account on which the

content appeared, and the users who have interacted with a post (by reblogging or

"liking" it) are shown in the "notes" section attached to the bottom of the entry. Like this,

the platform "creates a record of every image's [or text, recording, link] circulation"

which other users can follow (Fink and Miller, 2014, p. 612). Studying what happens on

Tumblr is thus not a matter of logging on and observing a fixed number of users and their

original content, but rather a matter of following a few relevant accounts as well as the

content that is being spread in a meme-like fashion on the site. This was the method I

employed as I studied the sad girls on the platform. I took note of users and posts that had

the most "notes," indicating their popularity and circulation.

When it came to Instagram, I used a similar but adapted approach. I was tipped

off about the presence of sad girls on Instagram in January 2017 from another grad

student who sent me an article from Vice that featured an interview between two prolific users at the time, Goth Shakira and scariest_bug_ever, who were presented as "feminist meme makers …. performing sadness" (Binny and Dre, 2017). I started following these accounts and was then led to others posting similar kinds of content by seeing what accounts they followed and interacted with. Instagram's affordances more closely resemble traditional social network sites than Tumblr, primarily in that each user has a centralized profile with visible numbers of followers. This led to about 12 accounts emerging as the most prominent in terms of how many followers they had, with follower counts ranging from 25,000 to 175,000. The high follower counts gave these users a sort of micro celebrity status, but the content for which they are known puts them more in positions of subcultural or niche micro-celebrity compared to the conventionally good-looking and luxury-focused micro celebrities usually associated with Instagram (Marwick, 2015).

Another question when it comes to online ethnography is whether or not the researcher should acknowledge themselves in the space that they are observing. Many online environments enable researchers to observe in a "lurking" way without announcing their presence there as observers collecting data, something that is not possible in traditional ethnographic studies involving physical participation by the researcher. The thoughts on best practices for this kind of work are divided, with some scholars arguing that the online ethnographer always has to announce their presence and observation (Garcia et al, 2009). For this project I have chosen to follow Garcia et al's (2009) suggestion that the researcher conforms to the norms of the online setting being studied. If the other participants in the forum or site at hand are expected to contribute

actively or announce their presence, so should the researcher. But if lurkers are already

accepted and common in the setting, the researcher is justified in conducting their study

unannounced (Garcia et al, 2009, pp. 58-60). The sad girls of Tumblr and Instagram do

not appear in older style forums or chatrooms where each member is expected to actively

participate, instead they have public accounts that are accessible to anyone who finds

them, independent if they are users of the particular platform or not. My observation of

the activity of these sad girls thus resembles the experience of most other visitors to these

online spaces, in that they might also encounter the content posted there as silent

onlookers or lurkers.

Another aspect of whether or not to announce your presence as a researcher

involves the ethical questions of protecting your research subjects. Here the platform

conventions of Tumblr, which means that most users have anonymized usernames that do

not reveal their everyday identities, work in my favor. I have determined it to be

acceptable to keep the users' handles without altering or anonymizing them because they

are nearly impossible to connect to legal/everyday identities. On Instagram, I have kept

the names that the users themselves present; sometimes this involves their full legal name

like user binchcity who lists her full name Julia Hava in the bio of her profile, and other

times just their first name like in the case of user ghosted1996 who only lists Haley in her

bio. The reason for this is twofold. First, these users' profiles are public and they have

from 50 to 100 000 followers, meaning that the information they share here is already

known to a large amount of people, independent of whether or not it can be connected to

the account holder's everyday, legal identity. Second, to anonymize these individuals

would amount to stripping them of credit for their philosophical and artistic works

(Alderton (2018, p. xviii) makes a similar argument in relation to her research about users who post about self-harm online).

At one early stage in this project I had planned on conducting interviews in addition to observation of online activity. That plan was abandoned, however, when it became clear how much information is already available online. Perhaps a future continuation of this research will involve interviews with the people behind the accounts I discuss here, but for now the public discourses available to me without conferring with the creators provides the foundation for this part of the study. This means that I cannot make any claims to knowing the experience of those behind these accounts, but what I aim to understand is the discourse created around the content posted in these mediated spaces, and provide my analysis of whatever meanings are dispersed there.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

CHAPTER ONE: Literature Review

The first chapter is a literature review that accounts for the scholarly work that is relevant to my study of the contemporary moment. It contains three main sections: Foundational concepts, Depression and anxiety in society and culture, and Mediating depression and anxiety.

CHAPTER TWO: Magazines: Relatability and Seriousness in *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue*

The second chapter looks at how the online editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue* covered depression, anxiety, and related topics during 2008-2018. It catalogues the

differences in style/voice/representations around depression and mental health in the two outlets. *Cosmopolitan*'s coverage is largely focused on being easygoing and relatable, with much of their coverage taking a distanced and lighthearted approach to issues of mental health. *Teen Vogue* generally takes a more serious approach to issues of mental distress, shown in their adoption of the language of mental health advocacy with frequent mentions of stigma and the importance of speaking out. The differences between the two are highlighted by looking at how the two outlets covered the same celebrity events and study of the antidepressant drug Paxil.

CHAPTER THREE: Celebrities: Intimacy, ordinariness, and self-transformation in the health narratives of Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez

The third chapter examines celebrities who have spoken out about their own struggles with mental illness and explored themes of sadness and weakness in their work. The logic at work in celebrity confessions is that when a famous person comes out and reveals that they are suffering they communicate to fans that it is okay to feel that way. The chapter focuses on pop stars Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez as representatives of traditional celebrities being open about their mental health. It also briefly discusses artist Lana del Rey's sad persona and her influence on the music scene.

Through these cases I discuss the increasing ordinariness of celebrities, who now have to maintain the relationship to their fans via myriad social media channels that puts excessive focus on intimacy and "realness," a framework within which being open about mental illness becomes an enhancing feature of an "authentic" brand rather than something to be ashamed of.

CHAPTER FOUR: Socially Mediated Sadness: Sad Girls and the Public Display of Suffering

The fifth chapter turns to social media platforms and looks at the figure of the sad girl as she emerged online. It discusses how she appeared on primarily Tumblr and Instagram, exploring the general sad girl discourses on these platforms as well as some examples that received added attention. These include the artist Audrey Wollen and her sad girl theory, the girl group Sad Girls Y Qué, the Instagram club Sad Girls Club, the social media brand My Therapist Says, and 12 prominent Instagram accounts. Here I look at the critical and acritical tendencies within the figure, acknowledging both the potentially subversive aspects of the activist oriented sad girls and the more commercialized versions of popular sad girls. The themes that emerged here were relatability, impasse, dynamics of coping, suffering and normalization's ambivalence.

CONCLUSION:

The last chapter discusses how, across the three sites, conversations around depression, anxiety, and general mental illness have taken shape during 2008-2018. It also reflects on the insights learned and speculates about what future research might look like.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review contains three main sections: Foundational concepts, Depression and anxiety in society and culture, and Mediating depression and anxiety. The aim of the review is to lay out the theoretical and methodological concepts that underlie and inform my analysis.

FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

This first part of the literature review covers concepts that are central to my understanding of the contemporary moment and is divided into the following main sections: Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Biopolitics; Postfeminism; and Recessionary Neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Biopolitics

My understanding of the contemporary cultural, social, and economic moment is informed by critical thinkers who define today's Western society as a neoliberal capitalist society. Neoliberalism is a term used in a variety of scholarly contexts. In their comprehensive anthology on the topic, Simon Springer, Kean Birch and Julie MacLeavy (2016) call it "a slippery concept, meaning different things to different people" (p. 1). They define neoliberalism in the broadest terms as "the new political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility" (2016, p. 2). The ubiquity of market logics and the accompanying demand of the individual to fend for herself in all stages of life is

central to my use of the concept. Neoliberalism reaches beyond economic and social policy and come to influence the construction/formation of our subjectivities.

Several scholars have theorized neoliberalism through the Foucauldian concept of governmentality (Brown, 2003; Barry, Osborne, and Rose, 1996; Cruikshank, 1996; Lemke, 2001; Lewis, 2014; Rose, 2004). Governmentality refers to the activities by which a state governs over its citizens. Importantly, within this framework government is not understood simply as institutions of political and economic policy, rather as "a continuum, which extends from political government right through to forms of self-regulation" (Lemke, 2001, p. 201). Foucault (1997, 2008) refers to these "forms of self-regulation" as "technologies of the self," which are central to the notion of governmentality. They are essential because they denote the ways in which we come to relate to ourselves and make sense of ourselves, and within Foucault's theoretical framework they are closely linked to systems of governance.

For Thomas Lemke (2001), Foucault's writings and lectures on governmentality aimed "to show how the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence" (p. 191). That is, to show that the development of subjectivity goes hand in hand with the development of the state. The way we become subjects is inextricably linked to the way the governing body of society exercises its control. So, under a neoliberal system of governance, our subjectivities are structured according to a neoliberal rationale.

The extension of market logics into all areas of society extends to the level of individuation, and encourages, or demands, that individuals become entrepreneurial subjects with full responsibility for their own lives. Lemke (2001) explains that "the

strategy of rendering individual subjects 'responsible' … entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc., and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of 'self-care'" (p. 201). Within a neoliberal logic, something like poverty is not a circumstance with a negative influence over the individual beyond her control, instead it is the task/duty of the individual to rise above such a circumstance and on her own create a life worth living.

Biopolitics is another important Foucauldian concept that is closely linked to the idea of governmentality. For Foucault (1997), biopolitics is the management of the life of a population, of monitoring and controlling things like health, birthrate, and longevity of a people (p. 73). Starting in the eighteenth century, political power stopped being exercised only in the giving or taking of life, and became occupied with the well-being of the population. Initially this concern arose from specific problems of illnesses, lack of sanitation in towns, and accidents, but soon the management of life became a way for state and police authorities to control and surveil its subjects. Nikolas Rose (2007) writes, "from this moment on, politics would have to address the vital processes of human existence: the size and quality of the population; reproduction and human sexuality; conjugal, parental, and familial relations; health and disease; birth and death" (p. 53). One of the most blatant examples of this exercise of power over life is the practice of eugenics in the first half of the twentieth century, which involved elaborate strategies of reproductive control so as to secure a future "welfare of the nation" based on a belief that some physical characteristics were superior to others (Rose, 2007, p. 54). But biopolitics

also works in less flagrant ways, and remains integral to the exercise of power in the twenty-first century.

In relation to neoliberalism, biopolitics becomes an important way to think about the continued reach of authorities of power in regulating our lives. What is remarkable with the neoliberal configuration is the visible withdrawal of the state in terms of cuts to welfare programs and deregulation of financial markets, which seem to suggest that there is less governance over our lives. Several thinkers have shown that this is not the case, that we instead are being governed in a "new" way, primarily by means of self-regulation (Brown, 2003; Cruikshank, 1996; Foucault, 2008; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1998, 2004, 2007). The state (or whatever form the exercise of power takes) is still invested in managing and controlling the life of the population, but has displaced the governing of its citizens from social institutions to the individuals themselves. Today this is seen clearly in the ubiquity of self-tracking and self-monitoring digital technologies like pregnancy apps and devices like fitbits, where users record their own activities, physical sensations and mood changes. The information collected is automatically shared with the corporation owning the app or digital platform, and frequently also shared to users' social media networks. This has given rise to what scholars like Deborah Lupton (2016) calls the "quantified self." This self is imbued with an entrepreneurial spirit of constant evaluation and optimization. The neoliberal subject, then, is "an 'enterprising' subject: a calculating, self-reflexive, 'economic' subject; one that calculates about itself and works upon itself in order to better itself" (du Gay, 1996, p. 124).

Wendy Brown (2003) states that "neo-liberal subjects are controlled *through* their freedom … because of neoliberalism's *moralization* of the consequences of this freedom"

(p. 5, italicization in original). Similarly, Lupton (2016) writes that "people are compelled to make themselves central to their own lives when they take on the ethical project of selfhood" (p. 102). Working on oneself in neoliberal society is not an act of self-indulgence but of virtue. We may be free to do whatever we want but we are morally and ethically obliged to "care" for ourselves not only for our own wellbeing, but for the wellbeing of the greater good.

Barbara Cruikshank's (1996) study of the self-esteem movement of the 1980s and 1990s provides a poignant and quite literal example of how the individual becomes accountable for the welfare of an entire society. In 1983 the state of California established the "Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Social and Personal Responsibility," marketed not only as an attempt at making people feel better about themselves, but also as a solution to social problems like poverty, crime, and gender inequality. Claiming to be a "social revolution," the movement took aim not at capitalism, patriarchy, or white supremacy, but at "the order of the self and the way we govern our selves" (1996, p. 231). In this way, problems like unemployment, discrimination, and systemic violence are not to be solved by changes to social-structural factors, but by

reforming citizens on an individual-subjective level. In a neoliberal society, then, the individual's self is not just her own, but part of, and in direct causality/correlation with the social body/good. Cruikshank (1996) articulates it succinctly when she says: "The line between subjectivity and subjection is crossed when I subject my self, when I align my personal goals with those set out by reformers … according to some notion of the social good" (p. 235).

Cruikshank's point about aligning "personal goals with those set out by reformers" is important here, as it indicates the connection between self-responsibilization and the expert knowledge that guides these processes of self-work. The various modes of self-governance outlined above are influenced, or directly formed, by certain kinds of professional expertise that are closely tied to governments. The relation between expertise and government is a reciprocal one (Greene and Breshears, 2010, p. 191), where what is considered "good, healthy, normal, virtuous, efficient or profitable" (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 175) is also an affirmation of the contemporary modes of political governance. Notably, this relation is not one of all-pervasive social control, but rather distributed into sometimes contradictory recommendations for living. Rose and Peter Miller (1992) argue that the role of expertise is to enact "assorted attempts at the calculated administration of diverse aspects of conduct through countless, often competing, local tactics of education, persuasion, inducement, management, incitement, motivation and encouragement" (p. 175). This expertise is doled out in official governmental programs as well as various types of "lifestyle media" (which I discuss more in the "mediating depression and anxiety" section of the literature review) such as advice giving in magazines and self-help books.

Postfeminism

I also follow thinkers who define the contemporary moment as a postfeminist one. Here I adhere to Rosalind Gill's (2007) notion of a "postfeminist sensibility." She uses the concept of sensibility as a way of capturing the often contradictory aspects of postfeminist media culture and its incorporation of both feminist and anti-feminist ideas.

Characteristic of a postfeminist sensibility is the strong connection between femininity and the possession of a female identified body, rather than social and psychological qualities like caring, nurturing, motherhood, which were strongly associated with femininity in earlier eras. Postfeminist media culture is highly sexualized with women presented not as passive objects of male sexual desire, but as active and desiring sexual subjects. This desiring female subject, however, tends to choose to present herself in a manner very similar to the objectifying ways of the patriarchal past. Key here is the notion of choice, as another defining feature of a postfeminist sensibility is the emphasis on individualism, empowerment, and personal choice. This desiring subject is a "sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever 'up for it'" (Gill, 2007, p. 151). Her autonomy implies that she is not following anyone else's (any one man's) lead but is voluntarily and on her own initiative always up for sex. The focus on autonomy and choice is a central aspect of a postfeminist sensibility, as the postfeminist subject is seen as having moved beyond the patriarchal rule of the past and emerged as an independent and entirely self-determining individual.

But, as several feminist scholars have shown, patriarchal dominance has not disappeared in a postfeminist culture, it has just taken another form. Gill (2007) argues that the control of the female subject has gone "from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze" (p. 151). Instead of being policed from the "outside," the postfeminist female subject has internalized a patriarchal value system and tries to police herself according to it. Gill (2007) calls this "a new disciplinary regime" where "power is not imposed from above or … outside, but constructs our very subjectivity" (p. 152). And this gets to another defining feature of postfeminism – the pervasiveness of self-

surveillance, monitoring and discipline. The requirement of the postfeminist subject to surveil and discipline herself functions in the same way as the neoliberal subject's need to self-govern.

In addition to this self-surveillance is an increased peer surveillance, what Alison Winch (2015) calls the gynaeopticon. Winch describes the gynaeopticon as "a gendered, neoliberal variation" of the panopticon, where "the many women watch the many women" (p. 229). The incentive to self-govern is thus spread through popular media culture and amplified among and in between women who come to police each other in a never-ending cycle of self-work. Winch shows how this works in her study of online profit-driven platforms targeting mothers, which also exemplifies how self-governance and peer surveillance are embedded into corporate branding strategies.

Another central aspect of a postfeminist sensibility is the prevalence of a makeover paradigm, most noticeably in reality TV programs about literal makeovers of participants, but also in the constant call in women's media discourses to update, modify, and optimize one's beauty regimen, sex techniques, and salary negotiating skills (Gill, 2007, pp. 156-158). This resonates with the neoliberal "enterprising" subject that "calculates about itself and works upon itself in order to better itself" (du Gay, 1996, p. 124). In an increasingly insecure and unstable economy where individuals are required to cope with frequent changes in work, income, and lifestyle, it has been argued that the ideal subject is one "who is capable of constant self-invention" (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008, p. 228).

Women have been described as ideal neoliberal subjects by a number of thinkers (Gill, 2007, 2008; Scharff, 2016a; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008).

Within contemporary media and policy discourses young women have been positioned as "subjects of capacity who can lead responsibilized and self-managed lives through self-application and self-transformation" (Scharff, 2016a, p. 217). Young women have become entrepreneurial subjects par excellence, blessed with the potential for endless economic and social success. The reasons for this resonance are manifold. As mentioned above, the self-governing and enterprising neoliberal subject shares many characteristics with the self-monitoring and self-surveilling postfeminist subject who is constantly "bettering" herself. Another point of resonance is that they are both "structured by a current of individualism that has replaced almost entirely notions of the social or political" (Gill, 2007, pp. 163-164). The neoliberal and the postfeminist subjects are both responsible for their own well-being and success, and can claim no connection between opportunities and power/knowledge structures, whether they be socioeconomic, racial, or heteropatriarchal.

An important aspect to mention here is the centrality of consumption in both neoliberal and postfeminist discourses. For Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine (2008), within neoliberal discourse, "the purpose of work, education, and leisure … becomes the possibility of consumption and thus the achievement of an identity produced through consumption" (p. 230). In late capitalism consumption and commodification are given extraordinary value in the project of attaining a "good life." The long-standing connection between women and consumption (Scharff, 2016a, p. 218).), further adds to the idea that women are the ideal neoliberal subjects. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) suggest that:

> … we think about what is and has been demanded of women, who have always had to be desirable, presentable, consumable, we can think about what is happening under neo-liberalism as an intensification of feminine as site (both subject and object) of commodification and consumption. (p. 230)

This focus on consumption also indicates the class identity of this ideal feminine subject, which Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) have argued is almost always middle-class. This also points to other exclusions established by neoliberal and postfeminist discourse, which tend to construct its ideal subject "in opposition to allegedly powerless 'other' women" (Scharff, 2016a, p.218). The othered subject is weak, passive, dependent and incapable of pulling herself together and improve her self-esteem and capacity to be self-sufficient. Unsurprisingly, this division tends to follow traditional power hierarchies where the privileged empowered subject is white and middle-class and its other non-white and working-class.

In addition, the neoliberal female subject is a laboring subject. Subjectivation here is not just consumption, but also production (of the self). Brooke Erin Duffy (2016) has written about this in relation to digital creative work, what is often presented as a way of "getting paid to do what you love." She describes how beauty bloggers and influencers (and other female dominated digital creative "professionals") engage in a kind of "aspirational labor" in the hope of attaining social and economic capital. The production of the online self becomes, in theory, a way of making a living. Postfeminist and neoliberal technologies of the self become entwined with economic production so that self-surveillance, self-optimization, and consumption are not only ways to personal fulfillment but also necessary for survival. This labor is also steeped in the affective

language of "love" and "passion," creating the perception that the work involved in creating the self as product is not, in fact, work at all.

Psychic Life of Neoliberalism and Postfeminism

Recently scholars like Christina Scharff (2016a) and Rosalind Gill (2017) have written about the psychic life of neoliberalism and postfeminism, drawing on Judith Butler's (1997) notion of the "psychic life of power." The notion of "psychic life" designates the central role of power in creating and forming our subjectivities (Scharff, 2016b, p. 111). As discussed earlier, neoliberalism goes beyond economic and social policy to constitute a form of governmentality that inform the formation and structure of individual subjectivities. The entrepreneurial spirit of the times creates an entrepreneurial subject that constantly calculates about itself to better itself. The same goes for postfeminism, which, as shown above, operates on a number of similar registers, and has been called a "gendered neoliberalism" (Gill, 2017). For Gill (2007, 2008, 2017) and others (Gill and Elias, 2017) what marks the contemporary moment is an intense focus on the psychological and a "psychologization of surveillance" (Gill and Elias, 2017, p. 16). She points to the tendency of "Media messages targeted at women [to] increasingly foreground not simply the individual but also the psychological: self-esteem, body positivity, confidence" (Gill, 2017, p. 618). The postfeminist and neoliberal subject has to continually work on not only its entrepreneurial skills, but its *affects*. Similar to the self-esteem movement of the 1980s and 1990s studied by Cruikshank (1996), which professed to solve social problems by increasing the self-regard of the population, so are contemporary calls for assertiveness and confidence marketed as solutions to unequal pay

for equal work and female underrepresentation in the business world. Women are not being held back by "patriarchal capitalism or institutionalized sexism but by their own lack of confidence … The solution, thus, becomes to work on the self, rather than change the world" (Gill, 2017, p. 618). The individual is, again, presented with self-governing as only recourse.

Confidence-Feminism, Can-do Girls, and Repudiation of Injury

Within a postfeminist and neoliberal culture the feelings that need to be managed are the ones relating to confidence, self-esteem, and strength. Gill and Shani Orgad (2015) have written about what they call a "confidence cult." They place this cult in a larger culture of self-help, which include things like the "happiness industry" (Ahmed 2010; Binkley, 2011; Davies, 2015) and the (positive) "psy[chology] complex" (Rose 1998). Gill and Orgad (2015) compare the confidence cult with Cruikshank's (1996) self-esteem movement but argue that "what makes it distinctive is its gendered address to girls and women, and its apparent embrace of feminist language and goals" (p. 325). What the contemporary moment provides, then, is a postfeminist twist on the self-help genre which recasts feminism as a self-improvement project. Scholars like Catherine Rottenberg (2014) and Diane Negra (2014) have written about this "neoliberal feminism" which is marked by a corporatization and commodification of feminism. The "feminist" subject here is aware of gender inequality but her "feminism is so individuated that it has been completely unmoored from any notion of social inequality and consequently cannot offer any sustained analytic of the structures of male dominance, power, or privilege"

(Rottenberg, 2014, pp. 424–425, emphasis in original). Feminism becomes an individual project completely disconnected from notions of social change.

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015a) has shown how this logic of commodification expresses itself in "girls' empowerment organizations." Here girls are portrayed as "in crisis" and in need of being empowered, making up a discourse in which "commodified girl power" and neoliberal entrepreneurialism creates "a market for empowerment, where empowerment itself becomes a commodity" (Banet-Weiser, 2015a, p. 182). The self-esteem movement that Cruikshank (1996) studied was adopted by the California state government as a social policy project, today's empowerment organizations have been incorporated into a brand culture where confidence and individual success are packaged as feminist progress.

The project of empowering girls is also captured in the concept of the "can-do girl" (Harris, 2004), a figure that circulates in contemporary media culture. The "can-do girl" is confident, resilient, and independent and has the capacity to conquer the world. She is frequently positioned as the opposite of the "at-risk girl" who lacks self-esteem, is depressed, and engages in risky behavior. Sarah Projansky (2014) and others have called attention to the racialized nature of these types, where the can-do girl tends to be white and the at-risk girl African American or Latina (p. 7). This points again to the previously mentioned exclusionary conditions of neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity.

Importantly, this focus on confidence and empowerment comes with a repudiation of injury, vulnerability, and dependency. Gill and Orgad (2015) writes that confidence culture "relies upon both an expression and a repudiation of injury" (p. 336). Examining "Love Your Body" discourses they find that the propagation of confidence depends on

the acknowledgement of a problem, like female body insecurity, that is quickly overcome by individual determination. An issue like body insecurity is definitively cut off from sexist beauty ideals and presented as an individual problem. Scharff (2016b) echoes this when she in her study of female classical musicians notes that "neoliberal subjectivity seems to entail a repudiation and yet also normalization of injuries that is coupled with a heightened sense of individual responsibility" (p. 224). In this same vein Amy Shields Dobson (2015) has argued that young women on social media tend to adopt a "performative shamelessness" in their self-representations as a way to shield themselves against presumed critical peer groups and adult surveillance.

Feminist Approaches to Affect

I am highly indebted to feminist affect theoretical perspectives in my own thinking about negative affects, like depression and anxiety, as both individual, social, and political.

Feminist scholars have been interested in the relationships between affect, knowledge and power for a long time, captured succinctly in the second-wave feminist slogan "the personal is political." Underlying this concern have been attempts to "interrogate the gendered nature of the reason/emotion binary," which "throughout the history of Western thought … has functioned to exclude women (and other bodies outside the white, masculine mainstream) from 'legitimate' knowledge production" (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012, p. 119). Elevating the emotional has been a way of legitimizing and politicizing experiences/knowledges that have traditionally been discounted on the grounds of not being "reasonable."

Feminist scholars have also been on the forefront of the "affective turn" in academia, as it has moved away from "the text and discourse as key theoretical touchstones" (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p. 9) to re-center the body in scholarly/intellectual thought. Scholars like Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), Lauren Berlant (1997, 2008), Ann Cvetkovich (2003), Sianne Ngai (2005), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) have stressed that affects have a place in the public sphere, and that the public is likewise present in our emotional lives. Importantly, these thinkers do not advocate privileging the personal over the public. Cvetkovich (1992), for example, has argued that traditional feminist theory has overemphasized the ability of personal and communal healing practices to function as solutions to complex social and collective problems. Feminist approaches within the affect theoretical framework have instead analyzed the "complex imbrication" of the emotional and the structural (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012, p. 121). Ahmed (2004, 2010) has argued that we look both at the "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977) and the "feelings of structure," suggesting that "feelings might be how structures get under our skin" (2010, p. 216). Feminist affect theoretical approaches thus offers a way to understand how our inner lives are influenced by power/knowledge structures, and vice versa.

This approach also echoes the influential work of Arlie Russell Hochschild who argued already in 1983 that emotions are managed and disciplined according to particular "feeling rules" in both the public and private. Making a crucial connection to capitalism, she held that emotions could be exploited for profit in the form of "emotional labor." More recently emotions have been linked to the market in Eva Illouz's (2007) work on "emotional capitalism." She argues that our economic relations have become increasingly

intimate and emotional, while our intimate lives have been restructured in economic terms. Here feelings are rationalized, measured, and controlled.

Hochschild (1994) later expanded on the notion of "feeling rules" in a study of women's advice books published from 1970s up through the early 1990s. Here she identifies a "no-needs woman" that reflects the values of contemporary capitalism, resulting in "a commercial spirit of intimate life" where "part of the content of the spirit of capitalism is being displaced onto intimate life" (Hochschild, 1994, p. 13, italicization in original). Lisa Blackman (2004) picks up on Hochschild's "no-needs woman" in her analysis of women's magazines in the early 21st century, where she argues that traditionally masculine "feeling rules" have been displaced on feminine intimate relationships, urging women to be more cool and detached in close relations.

Hochschild's "feeling rules" are also picked up by Gill and Kanai (2018) who identify three modalities of feeling under neoliberal capitalism, that urges women in particular to regulate their emotions in specific ways. These are "(1) the imperative to confidence, (2) the need to produce a relatable self and (3) the promotion of "boldness" as a value in itself" (Gill and Kanai, 2018, p. 321). The first point here refers to the "confident cult" discussed above. The notion of a relatable self was coined by Kanai (2017a, 2017b) in her study of a set of Tumblr blogs which portray everyday "girl" experiences. She identifies the production of "affectively relatable" online selves that touch upon difficult subjects but do so with self-deprecating humor that serves to defuse the seriousness of the problems. And lastly, the promotion of boldness involves a hollow defiance that taps into a history of "feminism-lite style advertising in which a generalized expression of female pain is cursorily evoked only to be resolved through defiant

assertions of individualism" (Gill and Kanai, 2018, p. 323). Gill and Kanai here identify some space for and encouragement of resistance and defiance, but importantly those kinds of potentially subversive affects "remain locked into the individual—indeed the psychological—requiring self-belief and sass but not, crucially, social transformation" (2018, p. 324).

Popular feminism

At the same time, the last few years have seen a surge in feminist activism, or rather, the re-emergence of feminism as a popular movement embraced by an increasing number of public figures and media outlets. In 2014, mega-pop star Beyoncé proclaimed herself a feminist, first on her hugely popular self-titled album and then by performing in front of human-sized letters spelling out the word "feminist" in neon at the Video Music Awards. Feminism became a buzzword seemingly picked up everywhere. Part of this trend was, and is, certainly part of the neoliberal feminism studied by Rottenberg (2014), Negra (2014) and others, where individual success, usually within the corporate world, equals feminist progress. But there is also something else happening here. Writing in 2016, Gill states that "the current moment—by which I mean variously, this year, this month, and right now —must rank as one of the most bewildering in the history of sexual politics" (p. 613). She points out that feminist advancements tend to be followed by "an outpouring of hate" from the "other" side.

Sarah Banet-Weiser explores this highly visible popular feminism and the misogyny that has appeared in response in her 2018 book *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny.* She identifies popular feminism as one that is highly

"brandable [and] commensurate with market logics" and that focuses on the individual

body while emphasizing "individual attributes such as confidence, self-esteem, and

competence as particularly useful to neoliberal self-reliance and capitalist success"

(Banet-Weiser, 2018b, p. 13). This kind of feminism is non-threatening to the neoliberal

status quo and with its focus on visibility risks limiting its impact by positioning "*seeing*

or *purchasing* feminism and contributing to its visibility is the same thing as doing

something" (Banet-Weiser, 2018a, italicization in original). Writing about the quick

adoption of #metoo by consumer culture in the forms of merchandise like cookies,

jewelry, and clothing, Banet-Weiser points out that mainstream feminism has a tendency

of obfuscating "the structural critique academic feminists have been making for years," a

critique that includes the commercial market that is now so willingly embracing

feminism. But she does not dismiss the importance of movements like #metoo, pointing

to the crucial conversations about consent that have since taken place on multiple levels

of society and culture. But Banet-Weiser cautions against uncritically adopting popular

feminism wholesale. Likewise, Gill (2016) argues that we should not abandon

postfeminism as a theoretical concept just because feminism is "in" again. A postfeminist

sensibility still persists, "even in those media productions ostensibly claiming to celebrate

a feminist 'revolution'" (Gill, 2016, p. 625).

Recessionary Neoliberalism

It is important to make a note here about the effects of the 2008 financial crisis on

neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, and the recent resurgence of feminist activism. In

the wake of the 2008 crash the focus of the news media changed with remarkable speed

from reckless bankers to "excessive" government spending. By constructing banks as "too big too fail" (that is, as so fundamental to the global economy that governments would be reckless to not bail them out) the favored solution became to provide them with as much public funds as needed no matter the cost, rather than regulating them (Curtis, 2013). The unequivocal response to the deficit that governments then found themselves in was to cut back on what was now understood to be "a bloated and unaffordable public sector" (Curtis, 2013, p. 76). In one fell swoop, (the rhetoric around) the responsibility of cleaning up the aftermath of the Great Recession was moved from the wealthy investors that had had a direct hand in creating it to the governments that had saved them from complete ruin. Like this, what could have been the ultimate failure of neoliberalism and its potential demise, instead became a doubling down of its principles and an "ideological justification for new waves of privatisation and the further 'rolling back' of the state" (Curtis, 2013, p. 76). One can also see how, in moving the responsibility of solving the recession from the wealthy to government programs (welfare and others), the people in need of state services also became at fault, further intensifying the imperative to care for the self without any outside help whatsoever.

Neal Curtis (2013) uses Martin Heidegger's concept of *dasein* to understand how the people hit hardest by the financial crash manage to carry on living without questioning the market logics that brought about the crisis. He argues that anxiety is the primary reaction to "those moments where our world breaks down" (p. 75). This anxiety is so great that instead of facing the issue head on and build an alternate world, we find "greater 'security' in the attempt to rebuild the one that is broken" (p. 73) Writing in 2013, Curtis urges activists and academics to "enable anxiety to work in the name of

alternative visions" (p. 86). Rather than suppress this anxiety, we should let it guide us in the process of imagining ways of living outside of neoliberal ideologies. Neoliberalism is very successful at constructing itself as the natural and inevitable progression of civilized societies (Foucault, 2008; Gilbert, 2013; Lemke, 2001), so much so that it becomes almost impossible to imagine other ways of building a society. Curtis (2013) argues that anxiety is what will allow us to think about how to live in different ways, ascribing a hopeful potential to this negative affect.

The activist collective *Institute for Precarious Consciousness* (2014), also marks anxiety as a dominant contemporary affect, but does not define it in the optimistic terms that Curtis does. For them, "each phase of capitalism has a particular affect which holds it together" and functions to control and maintain the unequal status quo. One defining aspect of the dominant affect is that it is a public secret, "something that everyone knows, but nobody admits, or talks about." The secrecy is a powerful tool in keeping the affect in place as it keeps it personalized. The *Institute* (2014) writes: "the problem is only visible at an individual, psychological level; the social causes of the problem are concealed. Each phase blames the system's victims for the suffering that the system causes." This is certainly seen in the individualizing discourses around mental illness, as well as in the rhetoric surrounding the struggles of the recessionary economy which is blamed on the individuals in need of help, rather than the social structures that produced the problems in the first place. The activist collective equates the dominant affect of anxiety with the notion of precarity, which has been used repeatedly to describe contemporary living and working conditions, and which they define as "a type of insecurity which treats people as disposable so as to impose control" (2014). In the *Institute*'s analysis precarity and

anxiety are directly connected to the neoliberal model of subjectivity outlined above, including self-help and positive thinking discourses that are presented as solutions to work-related as well as psychological problems. But they argue that the dominant affect can be broken down by exposing its social sources, and they advocate a "style of precarity-focused consciousness raising" to move out from under the debilitating grip of anxiety. Taking inspiration from feminist consciousness raising of the 1960s and 70s the collective proposes a form of political action that involves "analysing and theorising structural sources based on similarities in experience."

Curtis' and the *Institute*'s arguments function as calls to action, albeit in slightly different ways. Crucial for both is making a connection between negative affects, as felt in our personal psychological lives, and unequal structures of power. As such, they have guided my critical analysis of depression and anxiety and their connections to social structures in contemporary media culture. Is the increased presence of mental illness in popular discourse a step towards exposing its connection to socioeconomic circumstances? Or does the imposition of biomedical terminology onto psychological ailments foreclose any opportunities of connecting them to political action?

One example of a popular media text that reflects precarious living conditions is the television show *Girls*, which has been described as a modern version of the classic postfeminist text *Sex and the City*. Stéphanie Genz (2017) holds that the postfeminist spirit of choice and self-determination has been "inflected with the experiences of precarity [and] risk" (p. 18) in the post-recessionary West. The "optimism, entitlement and the opportunity of prosperity" (p. 18) allotted to the postfeminist subject in the 1990s and the early 2000s have been muted and forced to (somewhat) concede to the fact that

achieving success has become harder. Genz (2017) exemplifies this shift in her analysis of *Girls* when she compares its characters to those of *Sex and the City*. The twenty-somethings in *Girls* lack the empowerment of the *Sex and the City* characters who exercise self-determination and power through consumption and an implied financial independency. The women of *Girls* live off their parents and repeatedly fail at securing work. A precarious job market and insecure future prospects are obvious backdrops for the stories being told. Similarly, Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll (2015) have argued that *Girls* only invoke postfeminist female success in terms of how the characters fail to live up to it. The girls in *Girls* are "girls who should-be-able-to-but-don't" (Fuller and Driscoll, 2015, p. 257).

DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN SOCIETY AND CULTURE

This part of the literature review examines the role of depression and anxiety in society and culture by looking at scholarship that has critically analyzed the shifting and historically contingent understandings of mental illness. It is divided into the following sections: Critical Historical Perspectives; From Hospitalization to Deinstitutionalization; From Discursive Constructions to Self-Narrated Experiences; and Critical-Cultural Ways of Seeing Depression and Anxiety.

Critical Historical Perspectives

I draw on thinkers like Foucault (2006) and Rose (1998, 1999, 2003) who acknowledge the role of power/knowledge structures in constructing and making sense of mental health, and the influence of entities like the pharmaceutical industry in what

becomes classified as illnesses to be treated. However, I am also influenced by scholars like Cvetkovich (2012) and Blackman (2007, 2015) who do not see all notions of mental illness as creations of power structures and market forces, but instead adopt an approach to conceptions of mental illness that embraces critique while acknowledging and validating the experience of living with debilitating states like depression and anxiety.

In her study of gendered madness (in the form of the "madwoman" trope) feminist scholar Elaine Showalter (1985) marks the late eighteenth century as the start of modern conceptualizations of mental illness. Post-revolutionary Europe saw a shift in the way mentally ill individuals were perceived which contributed to increasingly gendered notions of the mad, where the repulsive madman was replaced by an appealing and victimized madwoman. Other studies of the history of femininely coded mental illness have also begun their examination at this turn of the century, such as Lisa Appignanesi's *Sad, Mad and Bad: Women and Mind-Doctors from 1800* (2007). This time marks an epistemic shift in medicines, sciences, and penitentiary systems.

It is this shift that Foucault (1977) outlines in *Discipline and Punish*, where he examines the move from a penitentiary system that punishes the body of the criminal to one that disciplines the soul. According to Foucault, the change in the judicial system from publicly torturing its criminals to confining them with the purpose of rehabilitating or "curing" them, only had the appearance of being more humane. The control exercised over the individual through the enactment of disciplinary practices is just as efficient, if not more so, than the control of the body, because it initiates a deeper and more long-lasting grip on the soul. When self-discipline has been properly internalized (supposedly in a successful process of rehabilitation), the powers that be have a hold on the

individual, who will adjust his behavior in accordance to what best suits the dominant

power structures. The previously mentioned concepts of governmentality and biopolitics

were developed later in Foucault's career, but were continuations on the work he began

in his analyses of penitentiary systems. Governmentality furthers our understanding of

how the internalization of discipline works and takes hold of the individual at the level of

subject formation.

Foucault (1977, 2006) also delineates this shift from "outwardly" to inwardly

discipline in relation to sexuality and madness. In broad strokes, what is described here is

how views and conceptualizations of the criminal, the mad, and the abnormal came to be

constructed within the "new" human sciences in post-Enlightenment Europe. What

Foucault so crucially shows is that these new epistemologies were not simple discoveries

of a firm and already existing order of things, but were in themselves acts of ordering

things. In so doing, these new knowledges manage to construct themselves as uncovering

truths that have presumably always been there.

In regards to psychology and psychiatry this meant the establishment of a field of

knowledge which could display an ultimate picture of how the psyche functions, and

subsequently prescribe it treatments to cure or better its makeup. Throughout the

development of psychology as a field of knowledge, the truth that it has presented as

absolute has contingently changed with contemporary power structures. This is not to say

that psychological and psychiatric knowledge is purely discursive or merely a social

construction that can easily be taken apart. Rather, adhering to this line of thinking allows

us to think critically about the discourses of knowledge that inform our lives, and take

into account the power involved in their establishment. This is what I mean when I talk

about power/knowledge structures, which I see as designating the entanglement between power and frames of knowing.

<u>From Hospitalization to Deinstitutionalization</u>

Up until the mid-twentieth century, the primary way of managing the mentally ill in the West had been through institutionalization. In England the Bethlem asylum (known as "Bedlam") had been associated with madness since the thirteenth century and in France the hospital Salpêtrière occupied a similar position since its opening in the seventeenth century. It was at the Salpêtrière that neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot treated hysterics and created a visual taxonomy of hysteria with the help of his star patients in the mid and late nineteenth century (Showalter, 1985). During the end of that century and at the beginning of the twentieth, psychoanalysis as a medical science was established. In the beginning this meant a shift from observing patient behavior in hospital settings to listening to them in private clinics.

Since the 1960s and onwards the West has seen an increase in deinstitutionalization, constituting a move to manage ill individuals outside the walls of the clinic or hospital. Rose (2003) argues that anti-psychotic drugs were central to the process of deinstitutionalization in the United States, and that the pharmaceutical industry has been highly influential in the practices of outpatient treatment of psychiatric diagnoses. In his study of the pathology of depression in the West, Rose (2003) connects the prevalence of the diagnosis to the neoliberal subject of responsibility, choice, and constant self-improvement. In this context the individual who is incapable, or not willing, to adapt to these sociocultural demands is constructed as pathological. For Rose

psychiatrists, health-care professionals, anti-stigma groups, and pharmaceutical companies all participate in the "co-production of the disease, the diagnosis and the treatment" of depression and related issues (2003, p. 54). He holds that the pharmaceutical industry has the most influence, as it has a direct profit-making incentive in creating more diagnoses that will require more medicalization.

Rose (1998, 2003) adheres to the theories of governmentality and biopolitics mentioned above, starting from the notion that the contemporary individual is one that self-governs and self-monitors, so as to follow and maintain the interests of those in power. For him, the institutions that primarily influence and control how personhood is made are "the psychosciences and disciplines - psychology, psychiatry, and their cognates" (1998, p.2), what Rose calls "psy-disciplines." Blackman (2004) has critiqued this approach as lacking a properly nuanced understanding of cultural difference. She argues that "the injunction to understand one's life as an autonomous individual is governed through very different concepts, discourses and broader argumentative contexts, creating very different dilemmas and conflicts for men and women" (2004, p. 233). The same is true for designations of race, class, and sexuality, all of which affect the way in which the individual comes to shape and govern herself. Blackman thus highlights the necessity of bringing a complex intersectional perspective to the earlier described concepts of neoliberal and postfeminist governmentality, biopolitics, and psychic life. It becomes crucial to keep in mind the exclusions implied in the construction of the neoliberal and postfeminist subject, and what categories of others this subjectivity defines itself against.

Rose (1998, 2003) provides a useful way of thinking about how institutionalized accounts of depression and anxiety are intertwined with power/knowledge structures, but, thinking about mental health only in terms of the institutions put in place to manage them risks losing sight of the experiences of living with diagnoses like depression and anxiety. I turn to scholars who have written about mental states with lived experiences in mind to gain a fuller understanding of what depression and anxiety might mean in the contemporary moment.

From Discursive Constructions to Self-Narrated Experiences

Anthropologist Emily Martin (2009) has conducted a comprehensive study of bipolar disorder in the U.S. By visiting support groups, hospital rounds, and pharmaceutical trade shows she examines how this (increasingly common) diagnosis is taking place in American culture. Among her findings is that mania has been adopted by the neoliberal market as a desirable quality that promises fame and success, while depression is seen as something to eliminate completely with medication. Remarkably, she also devotes significant time to the experience of living with a bipolar diagnosis, based on hospital visits as well as extensive participant observation in independent support groups. What she finds is that people living with the diagnosis have usually incorporated it into their self-understanding, but the way in which they have done so varies significantly from person to person (Martin, 2009, p.35). Within the context of the support groups, individuals tended to conceptualize their diagnoses in ways that worked for them. Research like Martin's show that the institutions that write the terminology and

define the diagnoses, like the "psy-disciplines," do not have a straightforward effect on the individuals that they describe.

Another exploration of the culture surrounding psychiatric diagnoses is Jonathan Metzl's (2003) cultural history of the emergence and proliferation of psychotropic drugs and their relation to gender. Metzl, who is a psychiatrist and a women's studies scholar, provides a detailed analysis of pop cultural representations of psychiatric drugs and shows how medications and their cultural representations have worked in a dialectical way, where the cultural has influenced the development of psychopharmacology itself. He argues that cultural conceptions (popular and otherwise) of mental health affect the encounter between doctor and patient as well as the way medication comes to be understood and prescribed.

Critical-Cultural Ways of Seeing Depression and Anxiety

Cultural studies scholars have approached mental health in ways that seek to open up new understandings of our psychological lives. In her mix of memoir and scholarly study, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Cvetkovich examines the history of depression in Western Culture, primarily how it has been understood outside of a medical discourse that by default conceives of it as something to be immediately cured. She starts with the concept of acedia, first talked about in early Christian writings on monastic life. The term refers to spiritual crisis, inertia, carelessness, and intense feelings of disgust and disdain (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 85). Acedia has frequently been written off as too religious to be used in any understanding of depression. As rooted in spiritual thinking it goes directly contrary to a medical model based on secular notions of progress and

Enlightenment ideas. Cvetkovich, however, argues for the use of acedia in theorizing

contemporary depression, as it "foregrounds matters of faith and hope as relevant to the

experience of being stuck, which can manifest in psychic and spiritual ways, as well as

biological and physical ones" (2012, p. 102). She aims to open her analysis so as to

understand depression "as the product of a sick culture" (p. 102). By turning to a concept

like acedia, which incorporates both the spiritual the physical, connections between

culture and depression can be studied beyond the (historical) limits of secular

understandings of mental health.

Cvetkovich writes that "acedia helps place the medical model of depression

within the longer history of notions of not only health but embodiment of what it means

to be human" (2012, p. 102). Thinking of depression as an "embodiment of what it means

to be human" implies a rejection of a medical model that sees depression as something

exceptional to be instantly cured away, and instead assigns it a central place in the

experience of life itself. The tendency to conceive of depression as abnormal indirectly

marks "feeling good" as the "normal" mood for which one should always aim. The

occasional states of "feeling bad" are also accepted as normal if they do not result in the

inertia and inability to act so characteristic of depression. Depression as a deviation, as an

illness to be cured, fits into the neoliberal society in which we all need to be functional

subjects capable of laboring. Adopting a model of acedia that places depression as central

to what it means to be human allows a move away from seeing it as exceptional. Instead,

it can be viewed as something that offers an opportunity to think about the historical

conditions of "being human" in different ways. Perhaps it can also be a way of breaking

from the requirements of the neoliberal (and postfeminist) subjectivation discussed earlier.

Blackman has written repeatedly about the importance of "reframing suffering as 'ordinary" (2015 p. 26; see also Blackman, 2001; Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001), which follows the trajectory of repositioning negative affects at the center rather than the periphery of human life. She explains that conceiving "suffering as 'ordinary'" reframes it as "not an exceptional phenomenon, but rather part and parcel of the costs of neo-liberalism(s)" (2015 p. 26). By conceptualizing suffering as ordinary, one can, Blackman argues, acknowledge the "difficulties of living normalised fictions and fantasies of femininity that [are] produced within [neoliberalism(s)] … as signs of personal failure, inadequacy and the associated economies of pain, fear, anxiety and distress that keep these apparatuses alive and in place" (2015, p. 26). Seeing suffering as ordinary, and not something that can immediately be cured or done away with, makes it possible to connect suffering with the neoliberal power structures that control our wellbeing while telling us that we have endless possibilities to maximize our mental and physical health.

Cvetkovich also describes how the academic and activist Public Feelings project uses the term impasse to refer to "a state of both stuckness and potential" (2012, p. 21). She explains that the notion of impasse maintains "a hopefulness about the possibility that slowing down or not moving forward might not be a sign of failure and might instead be worth exploring" (p. 21). Impasse could be a kind of productive possibility, allowing sufferers to rest in "bad" feelings without having to immediately work to get rid of them. Similar to Blackman's notion of suffering as ordinary (2015), the concept of impasse

allows us to think about and process the power structures that inevitably affect the possibilities of succeeding at a healthy life.

Anne Allison (2009, 2013) has coined the term "affective activism" in relation to "the emergence of new forms of youth-initiated activism in Japan, targeting the precarious labor conditions and material/psychic/social instability of life for young Japanese in the 21st century" (2009, p. 92). She describes Japan as facing a "spiraling sense of solitude, anxiety and desperation faced by so many, including youth, in everyday life" (2009, p. 106). Perhaps an analogy can be made to the West in general, and the increased conversations about negative affects like depression and anxiety in contemporary media is a sign of this sense of loneliness and desperation. For Allison affective activism is a response to this suffering which exemplifies "the subversive potential of affective labor" (2009, p. 92). During her fieldwork in Japan, she attended a talking event that aimed to prevent the contemporary suicide trend. She explains that the aim of the event was "to share stories of near-death experiences as a means of assisting each other … in trying to stay alive" (2013, p. 130). The participants told their stories of depression, loneliness and withdrawal, including how they managed to move beyond the worst point of despair and avoid suicide. The turning point for many was precisely the moment when they learned that they were not alone in feeling sadness and despair. Events like these are examples of this subversive potential, by "crafting new forms of sociality to the end not of capital or the market … but of helping anyone/everyone survive" (Allison, 2009, p. 106). Allison calls this "a vitalist politics that creates forms of connectedness that, quite literally, sustain people in their everyday lives" (2009, p. 106).

This final part of the literature review examines scholarship on the mediation of depression and anxiety and is divided into the following sections: Representing Mental Illness; Lifestyle, Self-help, and Advice Media; and Celebrity and (Online) Intimacy.

Representing Mental Illness

Analyses of fictional narratives that feature mentally ill characters tend to focus on how "correct" a specific portrayal is; that is, how much a certain depiction of suffering corresponds to the experience of living with the illness, frequently with a focus on whether or not stereotypes and stigma are reinforced or challenged (Birch, 2012; Cross, 2004; Hoffner and Cohen, 2012; Parrott and Parrott, 2015; Pirkis, Blood, Francis, and McCallum, 2006; Rubin, 2012). These studies tend to fall short of providing a social and cultural context from which to understand these representations. Although concerned with stigma and stereotypes that effect sufferers negatively, they fail to account for the power/knowledge structures that contribute to how we make sense of mental illness in the first place.

One analysis that does take power structures into account is Davi A. Johnson's (2008) study of the television show *Monk* (2002-2009), where she argues that biopolitical techniques of self-governance are furthered in entertainment discourses. *Monk*, which portrays a detective with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), has been praised by mental health advocacy organizations for its portrayal of the illness. Johnson argues that such "good" representations need to be approached critically for the way they perpetuate neoliberal modes of self-governance by "positively framing the cultivated desires for

individualizing diagnoses and therapeutic management" (p. 31). Johnson connects these

tropes to the governance of madness outside of institutions and asylums that previously

contained psychiatric abnormalities. Similarly, Gaston Franssen (2020) has analyzed the

celebrity health narrative of artist Demi Lovato and argues that she has managed to talk

about her own mental health struggles in ways that both reflect and produce a neoliberal

ideology of competitive individualism.

Blackman (2007) analyzes representations of mental illness in anti-stigma

campaigns and popular media and has identified a tendency to construct mental distress

that has been successfully overcome as "victim to victor narratives." Here the individual

who suffers starts the road to recovery by acknowledging that they are a victim of a

disease, then accepting that they need professional treatment, and subsequently

"triumphs" over the disease by following a psychiatric treatment model. This narrative

tends to construct psychiatry as a "technology of hope" (Blackman, 2007, pp. 2, 6),

where the medical discourse is what enables recovery and healing. The reliance on a

medical diagnosis lifts "the burden of agency and responsibility" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p.

88) that has historically been associated with the "crazy" label. In this framework, an

individual's irrational behavior is not their fault, but rather caused by inevitable

neurological components.

This model lifts responsibility from the individual by positioning the cause

"externally" in the body rather than the mind, but it also ignores potential effects of

cultural and socioeconomic circumstances, thereby preventing all connections between

ailments like depression and power/knowledge structures. The blind faith in the

psychiatric model leaves those who it fails to help responsible for their own inability to

heal. The individual who suffers, and for whom the medication and therapy does not work, becomes at fault. In this way, it follows the construction of the postfeminist subject as confident, strong, and without needs that cannot be met by herself. Any connections between feeling bad and power structures like patriarchy are denied.

Lifestyle, Self-help, and Advice Media

Self-help comes in many forms and is constantly changing. I take inspiration from Barker, Gill, and Harvey's (2018) description of a new hybrid of self-help that encompasses multiple genres, going beyond media labeled as self-help to include things like celebrity memoirs, "humorous confessionals," and films. In this sense, the celebrities studied, for example, are seen as providing advice in the telling of their own stories. The same goes for the entire discourses of the women's magazines I examine, where all articles are considered to be discourses of advice that provide guides for how to live.

Advice and self-help might be considered subsets of a larger discourse of "lifestyle media," which has grown significantly in recent years (Barker et al, 2018). Here "experts, coaches and other cultural intermediaries offer guidance on improving and optimizing every aspect of our lives from the appearance of our homes or bodies, to the way we raise our children, to the way we 'date', and how often and in what ways we have sex" (Barker et al, 2018, p. 10). Reality television and TV talk shows are important genres of lifestyle media that circulate "informal 'guidelines for living' that we are all (at times) called upon to learn from and follow" (Oullette and Hay, 2008, p. 2). Makeover reality TV shows (a literal example of the postfeminist makeover ethos) provide directions for how to best optimize everything from appearances to homes to finances.

And on talk shows like *Dr Phil*, the host gives advice in the form of "life strategies" based on his expert knowledge as a trained clinical psychologist.

The rise of lifestyle media has been connected to the rise of neoliberalism and the demands of the individual to craft her own life based on the "right" choices. Seen in this light, lifestyle media provide scripts for how to live in a world where more traditional identity categories, like those based in class and ethnicity, are fading (Sender, 2012). Lifestyle media becomes a mode of governmentality, playing an active part in propagating self-governance. While studying advice it is important, then, to acknowledge the role of these media in shaping the individual's relation to herself in terms of subject formation.

Women's magazines have played a prominent role as a genre of lifestyle media that provide scripts for how to live and I draw on a long history of scholarship of these media as key sites of cultural constructions of women, men, and gender relations (Ballaster et al., 1991; Currie, 1999; Ferguson, 1983; Gough-Yates, 2003; McCracken, 1993).

Considering Barker, Gill, and Harvey's (2018) hybrid of self-help, and taking into account the support networks on social media among sad girls, I also consider the knowledge shared between the actors in these digital contexts to be a form of advice. In this framework guidelines for how to live and cope with difficulties are not solely derived from publications and celebrities, but also from peer support networks, which may or may not challenge the advice found in the "mainstream."

<u>Celebrity and (Online) Intimacy</u>

In my study of self-proclaimed depressed and anxious celebrities I turn to celebrity

studies to make sense of the meaning and possible impact of these statements. A celebrity

is not just a regular person who happens to be known by many, nor a person with an

inherent "star quality" that means that they are destined to be famous. Rather, celebrity is

a complex cultural construct. According to Chris Rojek (2001) celebrity is, in the

broadest sense, someone who has an "impact on public consciousness" (p. 10). For

Graeme Turner, celebrity is:

> … a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by
> the promotions, publicity and media industries that produce these representations
> and their effects, and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can
> better understand. (2014, p. 9)

For him, celebrity is a way of representing and talking about people, a commodity that

can generate profit, and a cultural institution with a social purpose. The commodity

aspect is important here as it points to the strategic construction of celebrity, and to the

multiplicity of actors involved in creating the celebrity as a product to profit off. Rojek

(2001) calls these actors "cultural intermediaries" whose function is to "stage-manage

celebrity presence in the eyes of the public" (p. 10). Such intermediaries are the

machinery behind the public persona who work to maintain the image of the celebrity.

They are "agents, publicists, marketing personnel, promoters, photographers, fitness

trainers, wardrobe staff, cosmetic experts and personal assistants" (Rojek, 2001, pp. 10-

11).

When it comes to its social function, celebrity has been described as

compensating for the lack of community brought on by modernity, where the fascination

and attention given to famous people becomes "a means of constructing a new dimension

of community through the media" (Turner, 2014, p. 6). Celebrity has also been described

as a way to negotiate cultural and social identities. P. David Marshall (1997) argues that

"celebrities represent subject positions that audiences can adopt or adapt in their

formation of social identities. Each celebrity represents a complex form of audience-

subjectivity that … provides that ground in which distinctions, differences, and

oppositions are played out" (p. 65). The famous person, then, is someone that the

individual can model their life after and obtain advice about everything from fashion to

politics. Hence the value of a celebrity endorsement for both politicians and brands

(something the growing influencer economy is a prime example of).

The emergence and prevalence of social media has changed the practice of

celebrity. It maintains many of the above qualities and functions, but the internet has

changed the market by creating new kinds of celebrity that are formed through social

technologies. "Micro-celebrities" are individuals who have built up a devoted audience

on digital platforms, and maintain this audience through practices of self-presentation that

are "carefully constructed to be consumed by others" (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 140).

This configuration first appeared with the "camgirl" phenomenon in the late 1990s and

early 2000s. Here young women would mount cameras in their homes and broadcast their

everyday life to interested audiences 24/7 (Senft, 2008). Since, micro-celebrities have

become more common and gained larger audiences, with some YouTube and Instagram

celebrities amassing followers in the millions (Berryman and Kavka, 2017). Alice

Marwick and danah boyd (2011) argue that it is not only the "self-made" stars of social

media that engage in the practices of micro-celebrity, already famous people are also

adopting these techniques to maintain their celebrity status.

The intimacy formed between celebrities and their audiences via more traditional channels like magazine interviews, talk-show appearances, and tell-all autobiographies has been criticized as a "second order intimacy" (Rojek, 2001, p. 52) and an "illusion of intimacy" (Schickel, 1985, p.4; Turner, 2014). Marwick and boyd (2011) challenge this perspective and propose that social media offers the possibility of a more sincere or direct interaction between celebrity and fan. Acknowledging that celebrity practice by necessity "involves strategically managed self-disclosure" (p. 147), they suggest that Twitter's (and, indirectly, other social media platforms) affordances, like direct messaging and livestreaming, offers a kind of intimacy between celebrity and fan that was not available in the pre-social media cultural landscape.

The media discourse in which celebrities share their own experiences of depression and anxiety is thus one where fans are expecting greater personal connection to their idols. This creates a context for celebrity practice where disclosing private details is not out of the ordinary, but instead part of the norm. For celebrities, telling the world that you have suffered through depression might no longer be something that taints your image, but in fact improves it by contributing to the authenticity of your performance of self. As such, disclosing details about one's mental health might even be a strategical choice in order to maintain a close relationship with fans.

For the sake of my project, I am less concerned about the intentions of individual celebrities and more interested in how these increasingly intimate celebrity discourses take shape and become part of a broader cultural meaning making system. And in turn how this system influences individual experiences of living with mental illness.

CHAPTER TWO: Magazines: Relatability and Seriousness in *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen*

Vogue

This chapter looks at conversations around depression and anxiety in the online

archives of *Cosmopolitan* (US) and *Teen Vogue* during 2008 - 2018. I examine the

different orientations of these magazines when it comes to mental health by discussing

their respective styles, tone, narratives, mode of address, and types of pedagogy and

support around these issues.

Women's magazines have been the subject of many feminist analyses, with

Angela McRobbie's (2000, orig. 1977) study of the girls' magazine *Jackie* being one of

the first and most influential examples. McRobbie writes that publications in this genre

"define and shape the woman's world, spanning every stage from early childhood to old

age [where] the exact nature of the woman's role is spelt out in detail, according to her

age and status" (2000, p. 69, orig. 1977). One aspect of this guidance was the supportive

function provided by these magazines, often in the form of advice columns where experts

answered questions about everything from relationship to medical problems (Duffy,

2013).

As instructive texts for how to live, women's magazines have been of interest to

feminist scholars as reproducers of social norms and structures. McRobbie (2000)

describes how *Jackie* presents an ideal teenage girl whose interests and priorities go hand

in hand with contemporary patriarchal and capitalist values. Other scholars have also

identified magazines as key sites of cultural constructions of women, men, and gender

relations (Ballaster et al., 1991; Currie, 1999; Ferguson, 1983; Gough-Yates, 2003;

McCracken, 1993). Much of this research has contended that magazines convey

damaging messages that propagate gender inequality and present a narrow feminine ideal centered on beauty, fashion, and romance. They have been read as promoting negative body ideals and leading to destructive dieting and plastic surgery (Bordo, 2003; Wolf, 2002), as well as reproducing power hierarchies along the lines of class, race, and sexuality (Bhattacharyya, 2002; Jeffreys, 2005; Onwurah, 1987).

As a postfeminist sensibility has permeated media culture, so magazines have become important sites for postfeminist messaging. Several magazines have declared their support of gender equality and incite their readers to become empowered, independent postfeminist subjects. There is now a focus on "positive" images alongside the incitements to self-improvement. In her analysis of sex and relationship advice in *Glamour*, Gill (2009) points out that women's magazines have always portrayed femininity as "contingent – requiring constant anxious attention, work and vigilance" (p. 365). The advice of the current moment, however, is marked by an intensified self-surveillance that reaches into "entirely new spheres of life and intimate conduct," and focuses significantly on the psychological. The postfeminist subject is urged to change her attitude towards herself and become positive, rather than only change her physical appearance. For Gill (2009), this is another way in which the psychic life of postfeminism expresses itself by restructuring its subject at the level of her subjectivity. One aspect that repeatedly comes up in the scholarly work on women's magazines is their contradictions, how they tend to present messages about being confident about your body alongside pages and pages of advertisements for how to diet and shape your body into submission. Gill (2009) notes that rather than seeing these contradictions as "the 'endpoint' of analysis of magazines," one might see it as "the contradictions doing

ideological work" (p. 362). As an example Gill gives the "language of empowerment,

equality and taking charge" which infuses the conversations around intimate

entrepreneurship in Glamour magazine, but does so to promote traditional rather than

feminist ideals (2009, p. 362). In this way the magazine avoids presenting a clearly

traditional ideological message, and the presence of both feminist and anti-feminist ideas

marks the outlet as distinctly post-feminist.

Sites of study

I have chosen *Cosmopolitan* because it is one of the oldest and most established

women's magazines. It is also the most visited magazine website with 30.33 million

visitors during the first half of 2018, compared to the second largest in its category, Elle,

which had 20.97 million visitors (similarweb.com). According to their own website and

the media kit used to attract advertisers, *Cosmopolitan* is the "biggest young women's

media brand in the world" which reaches 78 million people across digital, social, and

print (Cosmopolitan.com, no date). *Cosmopolitan* is a global brand with local editions of

its magazine in upwards of 60 countries, but the US edition is the flagship of the

production, and in my research I have limited myself to the US edition's website for the

sake of feasibility.

Teen Vogue emerged in 2003 as an offshoot from the fashion magazine *Vogue* at

the same time as other large magazines aimed at adults published their own teen versions,

like *Elle Girl* (2001-2006), *CosmoGirl!* (1999-2008), and *Teen People* (1998-2006).

During the first 13 years of its existence it published pieces typical for publications aimed

at teenage girls, but it was significantly rebranded in 2016 when 29-year old, African-

American, Elaine Welteroth took over as editor in chief (Coulter and Moruzi, 2020, p. 6). Under Welteroth's leadership the magazine began publishing "more overtly political, and often feminist, articles" alongside traditional teen magazine fare like fashion and relationships (Banet-Weiser, 2018b, p. 103). One piece in particular put *Teen Vogue* on the map as serious in its political critique. In December 2016, shortly after the general election that made Donald Trump president, Lauren Duca (2016) published an article titled "Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America," which suggested that the president-elect was engaging in psychological manipulation of the American people. The article spread quickly online and in the mainstream press, leading to much commentary about the surprising critical sharpness of the teen magazine. *Teen Vogue* has continued in this spirit since, publishing stories about political issues ranging from reproductive rights to Black Lives Matter (Banet-Weiser, 2018b, p. 104). At the time of writing (June 2020), the footer on their website reads: "The young person's guide to conquering (and saving) the world. *Teen Vogue* covers the latest in celebrity news, politics, fashion, beauty, wellness, lifestyle, and entertainment" (https://www.teenvogue.com/). In this way, an attention to politics and critical thinking is folded into the *Teen Vogue* brand alongside more "shallow" topics like celebrities, fashion, and makeup.

These things all contribute to positioning *Teen Vogue* as one of the strongest brands in contemporary girls' magazine culture - even if it since December 2017 no longer publishes print issues, it lives on as a digital magazine publisher and has branched out to "consumer experiences" like a biannual summit and a brand clothing line at Urban Outfitters (Coulter and Moruzi, 2020, p. 6). The digital only focus, the clothing line, and the summit makes *Teen Vogue* representative of how magazines respond to a "new

media" landscape where readers are consuming their content on digital rather than print platforms.

<u>Selection process and data set</u>

To determine what articles were relevant or not, I started by searching for "depression" and "anxiety", which on both sites revealed plenty of results. One problem during my search was the various ways each site had changed its systems of classification. On Cosmopolitan.com, searches for "depression" and "anxiety" came up with large numbers of results (1769 and 1558 respectively), but the articles shown were not listed in chronological order and some of them did not even contain the key words. Due to the unreliability of the search function on Cosmopolitan.com, I looked instead at articles that had been tagged "depression" or "anxiety". All pieces tagged with a certain term are collected on a designated page where they are listed in chronological order. All articles tagged "depression" for example, can be found at the following URL: https://www.cosmopolitan.com/content/depression/. This method narrowed down the results significantly and presented me with a more manageable collection of articles. The standard with which tags have been added to articles appeared, however, to be quite uneven. The first piece tagged "depression" is from January 2009 and the last is from March 2018, but there is a gap from August 30, 2016 to August 8, 2017, during which no articles have been tagged "depression". I then started looking also at the articles that were linked to from the ones that were tagged (in the "related articles" section underneath the articles themselves), and some of them led me to other relevant tags, such as the broad "BATTLING DEPRESSION AND OTHER MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES" tag and the

general "mental illness" and "mental health" tags. The pieces I found on the pages of

these tags were all included in my archive. Some articles that were linked to from other

pieces did not have a single relevant tag, which confirmed that there was little

consistency in how the material on the site was organized. I decided which articles to

click on and count as relevant based on if they mentioned depression, anxiety, mental

illness, mental health or other related terms such as suicide, bipolar, borderline

personality disorder, etc. in the title.

On *Teen Vogue*'s website, searching for the terms "depression" and "anxiety" also

came up with large numbers of results (974 and 1180 respectively) that were listed in

non-chronological order. So here I also went with the tags "depression" and "anxiety"

that each had dedicated URLs with articles organized chronologically. Some of these

articles were also tagged with the more broad terms "mental illness" and "mental health,"

and I added the articles from those tags to my archive as well.

Quantity

The earliest relevant article in the *Cosmopolitan* online archive is from 2009, that

year and the following have only one piece on the topic, whereas 2011 and 2012 saw

three relevant articles each year (see graph 1 for an illustration of how the quantity

changed over time). The coverage of depression and anxiety picks up in 2013 with 17

pieces published that year and 18 in 2014. The reporting picks up significantly in 2015

with 54 published articles, then going up to its highest among the years I have looked at

during 2016, when *Cosmopolitan* published 73 pieces related to depression and/or

anxiety. Coverage went down slightly in 2017, when the site published 52 relevant articles, and further dipped in 2018 which saw only 36 pieces about these issues.

In *Teen Vogue* the numbers look slightly different. Here, there were two relevant results from 2009, zero from 2010, one from 2011, three from 2012, and one from 2013. 2014 saw four pieces related to depression and anxiety published, up to 23 in 2015 and then increasing significantly with 137 articles in 2016, 206 in 2017, and 170 in 2018.

I found a total of 258 relevant articles in *Cosmopolitan* and 540 in *Teen Vogue*. The significantly higher number of pieces in *Teen Vogue* might suggest that that mental health awareness is at the forefront of their brand, something I will discuss more below.

Types of articles

Cosmopolitan and *Teen Vogue's* online editions contained few traditional advice columns of the kind where experts answer readers' questions related to mental health. In fact there was only one in each outlet throughout the decade (Simmons, 2012 and Hill, 2017). Even if there were barely any traditional advice columns, I will consider the entire discourses of the magazines as discourses of advice, in the vein of "lifestyle media" which provide scripts for how to live (Barker, Gill, and Harvey, 2018; Oullette and Hay, 2008).

In both publications, celebrity reporting was the most common category by a pretty large margin, making up 35% of *Cosmopolitan's* and 39% of *Teen Vogue's* coverage (see graphs 2 and 3 for a breakdown of all categories). This kind of coverage includes both celebrities themselves opening up about mental distress (like "Kourtney Kardashian Says She Struggles With Anxiety" (Rees, 2016) in *Cosmo* or "Lena Dunham

Gets Really Real About Mental Illness" (Lewis, 2016) in *Teen Vogue*) and speculations about what was going on with a particular celebrity (like *Cosmo's* reporting about the state of actor Amanda Bynes' public breakdown (Rees, 2014a and 2014b) or the article "This Might Be Why Liam Payne Cancelled One Direction's Concert On Tuesday" (Ceron, 2015) in *Teen Vogue*).

The second most common category on both sites were accounts/reviews of new research or recently published scientific studies, constituting 18% of all coverage in *Cosmopolitan* and 15% of all coverage in *Teen Vogue*. Articles in this category included reporting about research on the link between epidural anesthesia during childbirth and postpartum depression (Narins, 2016) in *Cosmo* and a write up about German research into the cause of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) (Birch, 2017) in *Teen Vogue*.

Beyond those two types, the two outlets differ, with the third most popular category in *Cosmo* being listicles. A listicle is an article where the majority of the content appears in the form of a list. The listicle became a popular type of internet "journalism," as it became an effective way to draw readers in by promising to condense almost any subject into easily digestible list form (Poole, 2013). The *Cosmo* articles in this genre tended to feature how-to advice in list form, often with a number listed in the title (for example "14 Struggles Only Girls With Anxiety Will Understand" (Peyser, 2016b)), and they made up 14% of this outlet's coverage. There were significantly fewer listicles in *Teen Vogue*, where this type of content only made up 8% of the coverage. In the latter outlet the listicles also tended to cover somewhat more serious topics, like self-harm and police violence.

The third most popular category in *Teen Vogue* was general interest stories, which made up 14% of their coverage. I define general interest stories as articles that feature reporting about more traditional news items, often on the occasion of recent events or developments. *Cosmo* also featured some of this kind of articles, but half as often as *Teen Vogue*. Examples of general interest stories include a piece in *Teen Vogue* about a recent spike in suicides among teenagers in Silicon Valley, California (Dwyer, 2015) and one in *Cosmopolitan* that reports on the release of the suicide note of a University of Pennsylvania student that died by suicide the previous year (Koman, 2015a).

Shortly after listicles in *Cosmo* comes personal stories, which stands for 14% of their articles. Personal stories tend to be first hand accounts of a certain illness that often include a narrative arc of suffering, diagnosis and redemption. These are also found in *Teen Vogue*, but only account for 4% of their articles. Examples of this kind of articles include "How I'm Surviving My Threeway Marriage: Me, My Husband, and My Depression" (Romain, 2017) in *Cosmo* and "I Thought Strong Black Women Didn't Get Depression" (Wilson, 2017) in *Teen Vogue*. In the latter outlet the category of general advice was slightly more popular, constituting 6% of the coverage. This category contains a range of pieces with guidance concerning various situations (for example "Tough Love: How to Cope If There's An Alcoholic or Addict In Your Life" (Belz, 2012) or "How to Spot the Signs of Depression (and How to Deal If You Have It)" (Kiefer, 2016)). *Cosmo* also has this kind of general advice, but that only represents 2% of their coverage.

The last category found on both sites was write ups of viral phenomena found on social media or popular hashtags, a category that exemplifies how "old" media discourses

like these magazines are directly influenced by "new" media. This includes articles like "This Mom's Powerful Selfie Proves There's No Shame in Taking Anxiety Medication" (Koman, 2015c) in *Cosmo* and "This Woman's Facebook Post Shows the Real Truth About Living With Anxiety" (McNamara, 2016e) in *Teen Vogue*.

Beyond the above-mentioned categories, *Teen Vogue* had a range of smaller categories, such as coverage of TV and movies, with a lot of articles about the controversial Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* during 2017. The publication also featured some news style articles about social media platforms, like reporting about Google starting an initiative to help users learn more about depression (Elizabeth, 2017) and an app that helps people having a mental health emergency avoid the police (McNamara, 2017e). Lastly, politics and political coverage was also a recurrent category in *Teen Vogue*. Pieces were defined as belonging to this category if they featured a politician or made direct political mention of things like structural inequality. Examples include an article published the day after the 2016 presidential election titled "How to Cope With Fear After the Presidential Election" (McNamara, 2016g) that make direct connections between mental health and the election, as well as September 2018 interview with Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams (McNamara, 2018).

Next I will discuss each outlet and their dominant themes - their tone, mode of address, critical stance (and lack of one), and their approach to support, before doing a direct comparison of how both magazines covered the same celebrity events and science report.

When Helen Gurly Brown rebranded *Cosmopolitan* to focus on sex and pleasure in 1965, the message stood in stark contrast to the women's magazines of the day that tended to focus on family and home economics. Brown successfully cemented the publication's "sex-centric brand of female empowerment" (Zimmerman, 2012) and established its "fun, fearless female" ethos (Machin and Thornborrow, 2003) during her 32 year tenure. According to David Machin and Joanna Thornborrow (2003), who conducted a discourse analysis of 44 different national versions of *Cosmopolitan* from around the globe, the main discourse of the publication fosters the values of "independence, power and fun" (p. 454). Machin and Thornborrow look at *Cosmopolitan's* coverage of sex and work, two topics that frequently take center stage in the magazine. They identify the contradictory ethos characteristic of women's magazines in this coverage, showing how *Cosmo* presents serious information about both sex and work, but then undercuts it by using a "tongue-in-cheek" tone which distances the article from both real sex and real work. The same lighthearted tone that mark the decades-old *Cosmopolitan* pieces about sex and careers can be found in the articles about mental health.

In this section I will discuss a few examples from the *Cosmo* archive that illustrates the dominant approach of the magazine to issues of mental health.

A lighthearted and distanced tone

The lighthearted and tongue-in-cheek tone of *Cosmopolitan's* mental health coverage is on clear display in the outlet's many listicles. This genre almost by default

takes away the seriousness of a topic, in that it condenses any subject into easily digestible list form. The headline is an important part of this genre, and looking at the titles of *Cosmo's* listicles reveals what kind of issues the magazine promises its readers to quickly deal with as well as who the assumed reader is. The earlier articles tend to adopt a mode of address that assumes you are interacting with someone else who is depressed or anxious, like "10 Things You Should Never Say To Someone With Depression" (Breslaw, 2013) and its follow up "10 Things You Should Never Say to Someone With Anxiety" (Koman, 2014b). Included in this category are also "13 Things Not to Say to Someone Who Is Stressed Out" (Koman, 2015b), "17 Things to Never Say to a Girl With Borderline Personality Disorder" (Dingle, 2016), and "10 Things You Should Absolutely Not Say to a Woman With an Eating Disorder" (Peyser, 2016d). And even though the titles of these articles imply that the reader is the friend of someone who is suffering rather than the one suffering themselves, the content of the pieces is as much for someone with their own experience of mental illness as someone encountering it second hand, in that they traffic in a language of recognition. What these pieces have in common is the negative rhetorical approach of each list item, which states what NOT to say, before explaining why. For example, the first item on the list in "10 Things You Should Never Say To Someone With Depression" (Breslaw, 12/19/2013) is simply "Everyone's depressed." The author, Anna Breslaw, explains "No, everyone *gets* depressed *sometimes*. It's normal to feel the repercussion of a bad day …. But diagnosed depression is like any other physical illness that requires medication. Like, you wouldn't say "*Everyone* has a thyroid problem" (italicization in original).

The later *Cosmo* listicles instead tend to appeal outright for identification in the headline, revealing a mode of address that assumes that the reader herself is suffering from these issues rather than asking for a friend. Examples include "16 Things Only Girls On Antidepressants Will Understand" (Peyser, 2016a), "14 Struggles Only Girls With Anxiety Will Understand" (Peyser, 2016b) and "12 Struggles Only Girls With Depression Will Understand" (Peyser, 2016c). Related to these are also "17 Dating Struggles Girls With Anxiety Understand" (Smothers, 6/6/2016) and "12 Dating Struggles Only Girls With ADHD Will Understand" (Pugachevsky, 2/9/2017). The first three, about antidepressants, anxiety, and depression, are all written by the same author and published a few days apart in May of 2016. As the headlines imply, these pieces invite the reader to join in recognition and agreement. These pieces were published during 2016 and 2017, later than most of the ones about what not to say to someone with a particular diagnosis, which might be a sign that the perception of the average *Cosmopolitan* reader has changed over time. Earlier in the decade, the editors at *Cosmopolitan* might have assumed that their readers did not themselves identify as having a particular diagnosis, but might be interested in reading about it if it was framed in terms of what to do if you encounter someone with a mental health issue. But later on, during 2016 and 2017, the average reader is assumed to herself be identifying as depressed, anxious, and on antidepressants.

In addition, the *Cosmopolitan* listicles tend to make full use of the layout to further set a lighthearted and tongue-in-cheek tone. Often each item on the list is accompanied by a GIF or an image to illustrate the point (this kind of illustration is present in 50% of the *Cosmo* listicles and only in one of the *Teen Vogue* ones). In "16

Things Only Girls On Antidepressants Will Understand," for example, a GIF of media personality Kimora Lee Simmons disapprovingly shaking her head accompanies item number four, "People asking you *why* you're on antidepressants is rude as hell," and a GIF of actress Molly Ringwald giving the middle finger in the film *The Breakfast Club* is displayed next to item number nine, "People who ask you if you've tried a "natural" solution, as if they're being *really* helpful" (Peyser, 2016a, italicization in original) (see figure 1 and 2). The use of humorous visuals here serves to distance the reader from the seriousness of the topic discussed and presents a highly relatable self with which the reader can identify without feeling too much despair. This is similar to what Machin and Thornborrow (2003) describe in relation to the outlet's coverage of sex and work, where the tongue-in-cheek tone serves to create distance to real sex and real work[5].

Common but exceptional

One recurring angle presented in *Cosmopolitan* is that mental illness is both exceptional and common, as seen in the above quote about not telling someone who is depressed that "everyone's depressed" (Breslaw, 2013). On the one hand, there is a strong focus on how having a certain diagnosis is NOT the same as being "a little sad" (which is articulated in several different ways, but with the purpose of differentiating the legitimate illness/diagnosis from a less serious and colloquial experience) and how it in this sense is exceptional (you are different than your friends who are just bummed out about a bad exam). Another example of this is "13 Things I Wish I Knew About Depression When I Was a Teenager" (Moore, 2015) where number two on the list reads "Your friends might

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[5] I return to the function of humor in relation to mental health in chapter four, where I discuss how humor is used among social media users writing about their sadness and various mental illnesses diagnoses online.

use the same words to describe how they feel, but they also might have no idea what

you're doing through." In the accompanying bullet point the author laments clueless

teenage friends who say they are depressed because of a bad grade, something that is not

the same as suffering from clinical depression. Similarly, in "12 Struggles Only Girls

With Depression Will Understand" (Peyser, 2016), item number three is simply "How

loosely people use the word 'depressed.'" The author explains that there is a definitive

difference between depression and sadness, stating that "Depression is chronic, while

sadness is fleeting. Often times, depression isn't triggered by anything, while sadness

usually is. So no, you're not sooo 'depressed' this season of *Game of Thrones* is over"

(Peyser, 2016). Here the hyperbolic tone ("you're not sooo 'depressed'") and the

reference to popular culture also does the work of distancing the reader from the potential

despair of depression by the use of humor.

On the other hand in this equation, depression is a common experience because it

is just "like any other physical illness that requires medication" (Breslaw, 2013) and also

you are not alone in having it, because the writer of the article shares your experience and

so do all of the readers who clicked on it in recognition. This is also expressed in "13

Things I Wish I Knew About Depression When I Was a Teenager," where number three

and four on the list are "That needing mental health help is the same as needing physical

health help" and "There is no way you're the only kid at your school struggling with

depression" (Moore, 2015).

In this framing, psychology and psychiatry are generally forces of good that are

helping people while acknowledging a host of diseases that have just not previously been

properly treated. Item number three on the list of what NOT to say to someone with

depression exemplifies this. The statement that you are not supposed to say is "You don't need to be on medication — it's so overprescribed. Everyone's on drugs these days" which the author explains with:

> "Yeah, because the medical health world is realizing that mental illnesses are just as serious as physical ones. It's easy to pass judgment on these kinds of medications because of a few college friends who managed to score recreational Adderall, but for every one of those, there are hundreds of people who have been pulled out of deep emotional and mental holes with the help of medication prescribed by good psychiatrists. You probably know some of them — you just don't know you do." (Breslaw, 2013).

Here the author first equates mental illness with physical illness, and in so doing reinforces a biomedical paradigm in which what is physiological is more important than "flimsy" psychological stuff. She then ascribes large potential and hope to medication and psychiatry by naming "hundreds of people who have been pulled out of deep emotional and mental holes."

The relatable self

Another theme that runs throughout the *Cosmo* pieces is the relatable self. In her study of a set of meme-based Tumblr blogs which portray everyday "girl" experiences, Akane Kanai (2017a, 2017b) identifies the production of "affectively relatable" online selves that touch upon difficult subjects but do so with self-deprecating humor that serves to defuse the seriousness of the problems. The result is the production of a "relatable self" that never expresses too much vulnerability nor confidence. I contend that much of *Cosmopolitan*'s mental illness articles follow in this vein, and that their tongue-in-cheek tone serves the same purpose as the humor in Kanai's analysis - to produce a "relatable" self that is not too sad or too anxious. By packaging potentially heavy topics such as

depression and anxiety in easy-to-digest listicles, illustrated by funny GIFs and packed

with Internet slang such as OMG and STFU, one is disarming the topics of their

seriousness and weight. This serves a double function - on the one hand it lets

Cosmopolitan cover serious topics without losing its "fun fearless female" voice, and in

this sense their writing on mental illness fits into the overall style and "feel" of its other

pieces about things like sex and work. Like this, depression and anxiety also becomes

tangible on the same level as these other topics (sex, beauty, work), where recognizing

your own feelings in a funny listicle might make those feelings appear less overwhelming

and more manageable. On the other hand, the comedic style in these pieces risk

downplaying the seriousness of living with depression and anxiety.

Gill and Kanai (2018) identify the relatable self as one out of three "new

modalities of feeling in neoliberalism", alongside "the imperative to confidence" and "the

promotion of "boldness" as a value in itself" (p. 321). They describe an interesting

interplay between negotiating incitements to confidence and the discussion of problems

faced in the everyday of late capitalism in the blogs Kanai analyzes. They write:

> "In directing lighthearted humor against the self, the blogs attempt to walk the
> line between traditional affective regulations that mandate girls and women
> apologize for their presence, please others, and take up less emotional space; and
> contemporary demands to singlehandedly demonstrate confident, positive
> selfhood in relation to the degrading conditions of contemporary capitalism."(Gill
> and Kanai, 2018, p. 322)

The role of humor here is to defuse/disarm the notion that one is overly impacted by "the

degrading conditions of contemporary capitalism." A similar negotiation is happening in

the *Cosmopolitan* listicles about mental illness, where the pains of living with an issue

becomes intelligible as a common, and thus manageable, feature of contemporary life.

One specific way this is being done is in the use of the word "basically" in the listicle "16

Things Only Girls On Antidepressants Will Understand." Number 2 on the list reads:

> "Your body is basically a science experiment until you find the right meds. It's *so* rare to initially be prescribed the medication that's right for you, so you have to try lots of different meds out. But when you find that perfect combination of meds, you realize it was probably worth it." (Peyser, 2016a, italicization in original)

The phrase "your body is basically a science experiment" manages to describe an

unpleasant situation in a slightly detached way, primarily by adding "basically" to the

sentence, which disarms it of its seriousness. By emphasizing how common it is to have

to try out several different medications before finding the right one, the listicle manages

to normalize the potentially terrifying experience of being a "science experiment" and

assure the reader who might be in the middle of that process to keep at it because it will

be worth it in the end.

Comparing this to Kanai's blogs, where an expression and acknowledgement of

problems is done in a humorous way so as to appear relatable and not "too much" to

other bloggers and to third parties who might encounter them, the *Cosmopolitan* listicle

here performs this relatability primarily to readers who are themselves going through the

experience and might need reassurance that it is not as bad as it seems. By folding a

distressing experience (trying out different drugs) into a medical framework in which it is

just business as usual, *Cosmopolitan* here assures the reader that this potentially scary

phase of managing a depression is common and reasonable. This approach might

minimize the unpleasantness and difficulty of the process by providing some reassurance

to readers for whom trivializing what they are going through can be a way of making it

more manageable. By managing one's mental health issues like this, one might gain

temporary personal relief, but any discussion of broader systems and possibilities are left untouched.

<u>First hand narratives of suffering, diagnosis and redemption</u>

There are some *Cosmo* pieces that take a more serious tone, primarily those that present first-hand accounts of a certain illness that often include a narrative arc of suffering, diagnosis and redemption (categorized as personal stories in my research). These are similar to what Blackman (2007) calls the victim-to-victor narrative found in anti-stigma campaigns, where the protagonist starts out by suffering, then receives a diagnosis and is finally salvaged by the help of medication and therapy. These kinds of narratives tend to construct psychiatry as a technology of hope, whereby the subject enters into successful recovery after having agreed to the diagnosis and treatment provided by professional experts. The personal stories in *Cosmopolitan* largely follow this script, although it is not always psychiatry that appears as the savior. In a piece titled "Why I Turn to YouTube When My Anxiety Gets Out of Control", author Kerry Justich (2015) shares her ways of coping with generalized anxiety disorder. Describing a recent panic attack caused by a cancellation of subway trains, after unsuccessfully having tried to reach her mother on the phone, Justich went home and opened up YouTube, where her "favorite family of vloggers" soothed her anxiety. Like in most personal stories published by *Cosmo*, Justich gives the reader the back story of her diagnosis - her parents divorced when she was 14 and since then she has tried to keep strict routines in her life, if these are not followed or something goes awry, she experiences severe anxiety. Justich describes the severity of it as follows: "My anxiety paralyzes me. It overwhelms my brain and

body, forcing me to shut down. Everything I do, I second-guess. Everything I say, I

quickly question. And everyone I know I fear might someday disappear from my life"

(2015). She then recounts how this anxiety came to a head during her senior year of high

school, which is when she saw a therapist and psychologist and was diagnosed with

generalized anxiety disorder. Interestingly, this professional did not suggest medication,

only "meditation, counting, working out, writing, and using an ocean waves sound app"

(Justich, 2015), which goes against critical narratives that assume medication is always

the first route suggested by psychological professionals. For Justich, however, none of

the suggested methods were successfully able to quiet her mind. She explains that:

> "In those moments, I crave human interaction, but when I am in an unsteady state
> of mind, I feel like I can't rely on my friends or family to fulfill those needs.
> YouTube is the one thing that could turn off my over-processing mind" (Justich,
> 2015).

In her analysis of the cultural production of female psychopathology in women's

magazines, Blackman (2004) draws on Arlie Russell Hochschild's (1994) study of

women's advice books published from 1970s up through the early 1990s. Hochschild

compares earlier books which adopt a patriarchal view of the family, in which the woman

is assumed to be unequal to her husband, with later books that adopt a (somewhat)

feminist conception of family and intimate relationships, where husband and wife are

seen to be equals. For Hochschild, the earlier, patriarchal pieces reflect more "warmth"

than the more modern publications, which "call for more open and more equal

communication, but … propose 'cooler' emotional strategies with which to engage those

equal bonds" (1994, p. 3). This reflects a "cultural cooling" in which the gains of second

wave feminism have mixed with the goals of capitalism, resulting in "a commercial spirit

of intimate life", where "part of the *content* of the spirit of capitalism is being *displaced*

onto intimate life" (Hochschild, 1994, p. 13, italicization in original). Part of this

commercialization of intimate life is the idealization of a self that is "well defended

against getting hurt" (Hochschild, 1994, p. 13), Hochschild explains:

> "The heroic acts a self can perform, in this view, are to detach, to leave and to
> depend and need less. The emotion work that matters is control of the feelings of
> fear, vulnerability and the desire to be comforted. The ideal self doesn't need
> much, and what it does need it can get for itself" (Hochschild, 1994, p. 14)

Blackman (2004) picks up on Hochschild's "no-needs modern woman" and identifies her

in the women's magazines of the early 21st century, where she appears as someone who

"is the primary force in her own life and who is able to work on herself, through

particular techniques of self-production, such that she can get by with relatively little

support from others – particularly men" (p. 225). Here, traditionally masculine "feeling

rules" have been displaced on feminine intimate relationships, and women are urged to be

more cool and detached in close relations.

The emotion the no-needs woman fears the most is "the desire to be taken care of,

to be safe and warm, which is embodied in a fear of being dependent on another, even

one's therapist" (Blackman, 2004, p. 225). For Blackman and Hochschild, the emotional

needs that this feminine subject inevitably has, despite not wanting to have them, then

become relegated to discourses of self-help (such as advice books or magazines) and

professionalized discourses of therapy and counseling. Most importantly, they are shifted

away from the intimate relationship or close family and friends to professionalized

discourses. Turning back to the *Cosmopolitan* article from 2015, when Justich describes

the worst moments of her anxiety, she says that she craves human interaction, but "when

I am in an unsteady state of mind, I feel like I can't rely on my friends or family to fulfill

those needs" and instead she turns to YouTube which is "the one thing that could turn off

my over-processing mind". So here Justich goes against the "no needs modern woman" in the sense that she acknowledges that she longs for human interaction, but she then immediately disavows that real human interaction will be able to give her what she *actually* needs. In so doing she seems to construct human interaction as too messy and complicated (and perhaps requiring too much of reciprocated action), whereas watching human interaction on YouTube via her favorite vlogger family (Justich links to the SACCONEJOLYs, an Irish family with four small children who posts new videos about their life every day) provides her with the simpler, detached and mediated experience of human interaction.

In the last paragraph of the article Justich elaborates on her current relation to therapy and psychological professionals, saying that she has been able to depend on her therapist less now that she has YouTube. She says that she could use the therapist's help sometimes, but:

> "I feel empowered to know I've made it so long on my own. Anxiety is something that I'll never live without, but knowing that relief is a literal click away provides me a little bit of peace in my otherwise chaotic mind" (Justich, 2015).

Here Justich exemplifies a hyper independence from not only family and friends, but also the professionals that should supposedly be there to help her. So instead of displacing the care from family and friends to a professional discourse, like Blackman and Hochschild describe in their analyses, here we have someone who has gone a step further and has managed to make it also without those professionals. And although this might be seen as resistance to the dominance/monopoly of the psy-sciences and psychology professionals in managing mental health, it can also be read as a response to a non-functioning support system, say the failure of the mental health care system in the United States. And instead

of requiring reforms to a broken system, or turning to one's family, *Cosmopolitan* is here encouraging you to self-medicate with digital media.

Additionally, by saying that she feels "empowered" for having survived without anyone else for so long she also invokes the language of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018b), suggesting that she has gained something on a political level, although what she seems to have overcome here is only the dependence on others.

Definitions and diagnoses - what is conceptualized as pathological?

One last thing to note about *Cosmo's* coverage is the presence of specific definitions of what it means to be depressed, anxious, or in other mental distress. I ask about these with Blackman's (2004) discussion of the production of female psychopathology in women's magazines in mind. Here she urges scholars to examine "how the arena of relationships is made intelligible and what concepts allow the distinctions between the normal and the pathological to be thought" (p. 230). One way to ask that question in relation to my empirical material is to ask if and how definitions of particular ailments are given. Is it assumed that the reader already knows what it entails to suffer from depression? What definitional work is happening and what stakes and boundaries are being laid out?

The early *Cosmo* articles tend to describe depression and anxiety more in general terms of "feeling bad" rather than mention specific diagnoses by name (even if they have been tagged with them), and the solutions presented tend to be focused on self-help techniques instead of psychiatric medications and therapy. The first and only article from 2009, for example, is titled "How to Beat the Winter Blues" and does mention the

existence of the diagnosis Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) but suggests getting active physically and socially, watching your carbs, going on a mini-vacation, having sex, and "consider light therapy" as solutions without bringing up therapists or drugs (Epstein, 2009). This goes on until 2013, when depression as clinical illness starts popping up in the *Cosmo* pieces. That year 35% of their articles mention a clinical diagnosis, which goes up to 61% in 2014, 78% in 2015 and 2016, down to 77% in 2017 and then up to 81% in 2018. So from 2014 and onward the majority of the articles in *Cosmo* feature discussion of specific diagnoses and mental health and illness appear as obvious aspects of contemporary life. For example, an article from 2015 titled "This Mom's Powerful Selfie Proves There's No Shame in Taking Anxiety Medication" (Koman, 2015c) features a viral Facebook post of a woman holding up prescriptions for antidepressant and anxiety medications in a selfie and stating in the caption that she was unashamed to be taking them. The post led to multiple other women responding with their own stories of taking psychiatric medications under the hashtag #MedicatedAndMighty, something the *Cosmo* writer comments as follows: "I am a very anxious lady and I am loving this. Cheers to Jones, all these other women, and to reminding the world that needing medication isn't anything other than taking a step toward being healthy" (Koman, 2015c).

Next I will discuss the dominant themes in *Teen Vogue* and their generally serious approach to issues of mental health before providing a direct comparison of how the two outlets covered the same events.

TEEN VOGUE

As mentioned above, *Teen Vogue* was a fairly traditional girls' magazine up until 2016, when it was rebranded under the leadership of the young African-American editor-in-chief Elaine Welteroth. The publication has since been hailed as a "rallying point of resistance" in Trump-era America (Hinchliffe, 2017). Feminist media scholars Natalie Coulter and Kristine Moruzi (2020) have analyzed *Teen Vogue's* position as a political outlet for girls by positioning it in relation to the Victorian girls' magazine *Girl's Realm* (1898–1914), which was known for its engagement with contemporary issues related to women's rights, such as women's suffrage. By making this historical comparison Coulter and Moruzi show that *Teen Vogue* does not exist in a presentist vacuum, but is part of a longer history of conceptualizing "the female reader as engaged with the social and cultural politics of their respective eras" (2020, p. 1). They argue that the ideal girl defined by *Teen Vogue* is someone who "has a political conscious that is explicitly labelled as 'woke'" (Coulter and Moruzi, 2020, p. 7). "Woke" or "wokeness" has its recent legacy in the Black Lives Matter movement which popularized the term (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). It often indicates a "critical consciousness of intersecting systems of oppression" that acknowledges the "oppression that exists in individual and collective experiences" (Ashlee, Zamora and Karikari 2017, p. 90). Coulter and Moruzi (2020) point out that the term changes in different circumstances and that *Teen Vogue* does not explicitly define what it means by "wokeness," but that Welteroth's use of the concept "implies that the magazine is articulating an awareness of social issues and the ways that systematic oppressions intersect" (p. 7). They go on to state that part of the magazine's "wokeness" is that it "resists much of the familiar post-feminist narratives of

empowerment and the aspirational fantasies of personal improvement … that have been endemic in girls' print culture in the early twenty-first century" (Coulter and Moruzi, 2020, p. 7).

This ethos of "wokeness" is reflected also in the publication's coverage of mental illness when connections between mental health and systemic oppression are made (seen for example in a piece that connects depression and suicide rates among transgender kids with stigma and hostility against them (McNamara, 2016a) or in an article about how racial discrimination causes stress in those who experience it (McNamara, 2016b)). This happens in 6% of all *Teen Vogue's* articles, which is not an overwhelming amount of times, but far more often than *Cosmopolitan* which only connects mental distress with structural inequalities in 1.5% of their pieces.

What stands out with *Teen Vogue*'s mental health coverage is that it significantly increases in 2016 (see graph 1), from having been in the single digits up until 2014, it increases to 23 pieces during 2015 but then significantly jumps to 137 articles during 2016. This increase in coverage might be a sign that articles relating to mental health fit well into the publication's updated and "woke" brand.

Providing critical context - placing serious topics next to personal issues

The overall tone in *Teen Vogue* tended to be straightforward, earnest, and serious. One way this was expressed was in the kind of topics covered in their general interest category, which featured both more expected subjects like a story about how telepsychiatry lets therapists treat you via digital tools like Skype and FaceTime (Sinay, 2016b) and more politically inflected stories like a hospital getting sued for

discrimination after a transgender teen died by suicide after having been treated there (McNamara, 2016f).

Taking a closer look at one of the stories in this category reveals the serious tone and critical stance adopted by the publication. In January 2017 *Teen Vogue* wrote about the fate of a black teenager, Bresha Meadows, who was accused of killing her father after she and her family endured years of abuse by him (McNamara, 2017a). The outlet reports that Meadows was transferred from the juvenile jail she had been staying in for 175 days to a mental health treatment facility to receive an evaluation. The author of the piece points out that "despite the change, Bresha will not be free to come and go from the treatment facility" (McNamara, 2017a). The support group that had formed around the hashtag #FreeBresha is then mentioned, as is the day of action taken to urge the judge to release Meadows from juvenile detention. Here *Teen Vogue* cites research that shows the inefficiency of such confinement not only by referring to the activist group, but also citing and linking to a report from the Justice Policy Institute that shows how "incarcerating young people does little to help them in the long run, instead increasing their chances of returning to jail or prison in the future" (Justice Policy Institute, 2006; McNamara, 2017a). The *Teen Vogue* writer, Brittany McNamara, then points out that the #FreeBresha group called attention to another important issue: "survivors of domestic abuse being punished." She cites research from the "Women in Prison Project of the Correctional Association of New York" which shows that "67% of women accused of killing someone close to them had been abused by that person" and that "of all the state's inmates in for any charge, 75% had experienced severe physical domestic violence" (McNamara, 2017a). This leads McNamara to state that "all too often, survivors of

domestic violence are punished for their survival," before citing the official statement

from the #FreeBresha group about why the teenager should be freed while awaiting trial.

In many ways this is traditional reporting of a story like this - giving the reader the

backstory of what had previously happened to Meadows in addition to describing the

latest developments in the case. But McNamara adds a critical perspective to the story by

referring to research both about the inefficiency of the juvenile jail system and the high

levels of domestic violence victims among incarcerated women, making it not only a

story about a singular teenage girl's tragic fate, but also about the larger problem of

women who stand up to their abusers being punished by the legal system. In this way the

outlet lives up to its ethos of wokeness. Additionally, by tagging this and similar stories

with "mental health" and other relevant tags, it shows up among other, more personal and

individual-focused pieces, and the reader learns to include also such structural issues in

the scope of mental health.

Seriousness in favor of distanced relatability

  While *Cosmo* tends to have a tongue-in-cheek tone that presents issues in

relatable ways without getting too threatening or uncomfortable, the tone in the *Teen*

Vogue pieces are instead marked by a seriousness that treats mental illness in a

straightforward and earnest way. This is seen in how different the listicles look in each

outlet. *Teen Vogue* had fewer articles in this genre on the whole than *Cosmo* (8% versus

15%) and their listicles tended to maintain the somber tone of the outlet at large. This is

seen in a few key differences in the layout of the listicles in the two outlets. The first of

these is the introductory paragraph that *Teen Vogue* includes in all of their listicles, which

presents the issue at hand and gives some context. An example of this kind of

introduction is the following, which accompanies the piece "26 Date Ideas for Your

Anxious Partner":

> "Anxiety can often make dating a challenge — unfamiliar people and environments might heighten the mental and physical symptoms someone with anxiety faces. This can make it difficult to plan a first date, or even an outing with a long-term significant other." (Quinn, 2018)

This gives the reader a framework for why folks with anxiety might need specific dating

ideas, and what those ideas might look like. 100% of the *Teen Vogue* listicles include an

introduction in this vein, compared to only 34% of the *Cosmo* listicles, which often jump

straight into the list of relatable points. Another marked difference between the layout of

listicles in the two outlets is the use of GIFs or humorous illustrations to accompany

items on the list. Only 1 of *Teen Vogue's* listicles (representing 2% of all its listicles)

contained GIFs and comedic images, whereas 50% of *Cosmo's* listicles did the same.

This contributes to an overall more serious tone in *Teen Vogue* and underscores the more

relatable and easygoing approach taken by *Cosmo*. The presence of illustrations like these

in *Cosmo* contributes to the more lighthearted tone of that publication and the lack of

them in *Teen Vogue* in comparison contributes to its more earnest tone.

The above article is also an example of *Teen Vogue* collaborating with the website

The Mighty, which is a media platform and digital community focused on connecting

people facing health challenges and disabilities (6% of the *Teen Vogue* articles are

collaborations with this site). The 26 date ideas presented in the listicle at hand are pooled

from *The Mighty* community members who themselves suffer from anxiety and have

contributed what an ideal date looks like for them. *Teen Vogue* has a few similar pieces

that are collaborations with the online therapy service Talkspace (a total of four of *Teen*

Vogue's articles are crossposts from the Talkspace blog), while *Cosmo* does not have any similar collaborations.

This seriousness is also reflected in the topics of the listicles themselves. Within this category on the site one can for example find one titled "11 Things You Can Do To Help Black Lives Matter End Police Violence" (Blades, 2016b), which manages to both explain the importance of mental health in the Black Lives Matter movement (number eight on the list is "Advocate for mental health intervention" and explains how victims of police brutality often have mental health issues) and situate political causes like these in the context of mental health by tagging the article mental health and thus showing it to readers who are browsing those topics. This is again a way in which the magazine lives up to its "wokeness."

Another example is the piece "11 Things You Can Do to Avoid Self-Harm" (May 9, 2016) which is written by Vijayta Szpitalak, who is introduced as a "Columbia University trained licensed mental health counselor with a practice in New York since 2010". This is an example of *Teen Vogue* employing experts in their mental health coverage, something they do in 14% of their articles (compared to 9% of *Cosmo's* pieces). Taking a closer look at how this piece is structured reveals how *Teen Vogue* tends to address its readers.

The article starts with a trigger warning stating that it "contains detailed information about self harm in the form of cutting and may be disturbing for some readers" (Szpitalak, 2016). The text then begins by addressing the reader directly, stating "chances are you or someone you know cuts themselves" before mentioning two celebrities who have been open about their cutting (Angelina Jolie and Demi Lovato).

Szpitalak then introduces self-harm and cutting by stating first how common it is (citing research that shows 46% of high school students in the US having engaged with it at some point) and then explaining what self-harm actually is. This bare-bones definition reads: "a maladaptive method of coping that involves non-suicidal self-infliction of pain in the form of cutting, using anything from fingernails to razor blades, burning themselves, or preventing previous wounds from healing" (Szpitalak, 2016). This is an example of *Teen Vogue* not only mentioning clinical diagnoses but also providing definitions from experts or professional sources and sites of how certain mental illness issues are medically defined, which I discuss more below.

Szpitalak then describes how there are a number of reasons why people might engage in self-harming behavior before including a quote from a (child and adolescent) psychiatrist about possible reasons for cutting. And then she addresses the reader directly again: "It's important to first realize that cutting doesn't actually solve any problems, and isn't an effective method of coping for the long-term," before referencing research that has found a connection between self-harm and suicide attempts (Szpitalak, 2016). It is not until after five opening paragraphs that the listicle itself is introduced with the following statement: "If you cut, it is possible to stop. The key is replacing the behavior with a healthy coping mechanism. It takes effort, love, and patience, but it can be done. As a starter, you can do the following:" (Szpitalak, 2016). The list then reads as follows: "Identify triggers; Identify emotions; Tell someone; Seek professional help; Try a less severe form; Write your future self letters; Delay cutting; Consider Dialectical Behavior Therapy; Cultivate mindfulness; Feel a release; Stay positive." There is a seriousness and weight given to the issue of self-harm here, which is treated like an (almost) life and

death matter. With this piece *Teen Vogue* shows that it takes the issue of self-harm and its high prevalence among high school students very seriously, and in so doing it also encourages its readers to take their own and their peers' mental health seriously.

Compare this to *Cosmo*, who only mentions self-harm in three of their articles and when the issue appears it is only indirectly: It is mentioned briefly in relation to Demi Lovato; in a study about the antidepressant drug Paxil; and in one personal story/first-hand account where a writer describes writing publically about her mental illness on social media as a form of self-harm (Mei, 2016a; Narins, 2015; Peyser, 2016e). In other words, Cosmo does not give the same weight to the issue of self-harm as *Teen Vogue* does. Perhaps this is because self-harm is an issue often associated with a demographic that is younger than *Cosmopolitan*'s target audience, or because it is hard to write about an issue like this while maintaining a distanced and lighthearted tone. Nevertheless, the coverage of self-harm in *Teen Vogue* and its absence in *Cosmo* is another example of the different orientations of each magazine.

Definitions and diagnoses

When it comes to the presence of definitions of depression, anxiety, and other mental states, the changes over time in *Teen Vogue* are similar to *Cosmopolitan*, but more in the sense that there are few pieces published at all related to depression and anxiety up until 2015. From the second half of that year and onwards, almost all of the *Teen Vogue* pieces mention clinical diagnoses and biomedical treatments. In 2015 70% of their articles mention a clinical diagnosis, which goes up to 82% in 2016, 93% in 2017 and down to 91% in 2018. Again, this seems to suggest that the medical discourses around

mental health became more mainstream and were assumed to be widely known from 2014 and onward.

In *Teen Vogue* the definitional work is at times very explicit, in that they not only mention a clinical diagnosis but also provide lists of symptoms and other facts about the diagnosis at hand (these kind of explicit definitions appear in 9% of their pieces). An example of this, in addition to the one above about self-harm, is an article about pop group One Direction canceling a concert because one of their members had an anxiety attack. Here the magazine explains "Anxiety disorders affect millions of people, and panic attack symptoms can range from shortness of breath, elevated heart rate, and even a choking feeling" (Ceron, 2015). In the sentence, the phrase "millions of people" links to a page on the Anxiety and Depression Association of America's (ADAA) website with facts and statistics about anxiety and depression, which also includes links to information sites about various specific diagnoses, such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, and Major Depressive Disorder (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, n.d.). By providing their readers with the symptoms of a panic attack and by linking to a website aligned with the medical establishment, *Teen Vogue* adopts a sort of pedagogical approach that assumes the reader might not know exactly what constitutes a panic attack, but might benefit from medical definitions that also include information on how to treat one.

Providing support

What also marked *Teen Vogue's* approach to mental health was a dedication to providing support to its readers, which is shown clearly in their coverage of the Netflix

series *13 Reasons Why*. The show, based on the 2007 young adult novel by Jay Asher,

premiered on the streaming service March 31, 2017 and received widespread attention

due to its handling of teenage suicide and mental illness. The story follows the aftermath

of 17-year old Hannah Baker's suicide, and the unraveling of the box of cassette tapes

she recorded leading up to her death, in which she reveals why she choose to end her life.

Baker recorded 13 tapes for 13 different people who she claims are responsible for her

suicide, and throughout the first season the viewer gets to follow her surviving friend

Clay Baker as he goes through the tapes, featuring some tough scenes of sexual assault

and bullying. The series quickly became popular among teenagers and young adults, but

received criticism for glorifying suicide and risked spreading copycat behavior and self

harm among vulnerable groups (Saint Louis, 2017).

  Teen Vogue published an op-ed on the day of the show's release, in which a

suicide prevention advocate explains what is missing from the show (Cline, 2017). In the

piece, MollyKate Cline says that "the audience is shown what _not_ to do without examples

of what they actually should do" (italicization in original), pointing specifically to how

Baker is never seen successfully reaching out for help to her peers or the adults in her life

and that the show fails to mention depression or other mental health issues, which are

common backdrops to suicide. Cline also points to the high numbers of suicide among

teenagers in the US (it is the "second leading cause of death for ages 10–24, with 5,240

attempts per day from kids grades 7–12" (Cline, 2017)), stating that the best way you can

get help if you are being bullied or feeling suicidal is to tell someone, something she had

hoped the show "would focus on instead of a dramatic story line over getting revenge for

those 13 people".

During 2017 *Teen Vogue* published 16 articles about *13 Reasons Why* and the controversy surrounding it (*Cosmo* did not cover the show at all). Looking at the content of these pieces, the publication appears concerned to provide its readers with nuanced and responsible coverage of a life and death topic. Among the articles is a set of quotes from teenagers themselves about the show (motivated by the fact that "dozens of articles have been written by adults, but fewer have shown the opinions of actual high school students") that also features input from a psychiatry professor (Gross, 2017); a collection of resources for getting help if you have been experiencing depression or suicidal ideation after watching the show (McNamara, 2017d); and an interview with suicide attempt survivors about the suicide scene in the series (which was heavily criticized as overly graphic and was deleted from the first season by Netflix in July, 2019 (Brito, 2019)(Herman, 2017)). All of the articles contain some version of the following phrase at the end: "If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or text Crisis Text Line at 741-741." *Teen Vogue* seems to think about their readers' needs for support in relation to the show, and positions itself as a provider of that support.

The frequency with which *Teen Vogue* includes numbers to hotlines or links to other resources for those in distress is significant because it contributes to the overall serious tone of the publication when it comes to issues of mental health. In *Teen Vogue* 22% of articles include the phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (or equivalents like the Crisis Text Line and the National Eating Disorders Association Helpline) or links to sites with further resources (like the website of the phone hotlines or

organizations like the Trevor Project, which is focused on helping LGBTQ-youth). This is compared to 10% of *Cosmo* articles featuring similar resources.

Interesting to note in *Teen Vogue*'s coverage of *13 Reasons Why* and of suicide in general, is their use of the phrase "died by suicide" instead of the commonly used "committed suicide". The former phrase is preferred by mental health advocates, as it removes culpability from the person who has lost their life and opens up for discussions of the disease or disorder they were suffering (Spector, 2018). By employing the language of mental health advocates, the magazine consciously aligns itself with an anti-stigma/awareness discourse and acknowledge their own role as participants in the public discourse around mental health, including a recognition of the role of language in shaping this discourse.

This is seen clearly in their repeated mention of fighting stigma and on the value of speaking out about mental illness as an important step towards normalizing mental health issues. In their reporting about celebrities speaking out about their mental health issues, for example, they tend to point out the inherent good of talking about it. In an article about an open letter written by Lady Gaga for the Born This Way Foundation's website (a foundation that seeks to "support the mental and emotional wellness of young people by putting their needs, ideas, and voices first") about living with PTSD, the writer recounts how Gaga shares that she is going to therapy and is taking medication, but feels that "the most inexpensive and perhaps the best medicine in the world is words" which is why she is speaking up. The *Teen Vogue* writer, Brittney McNamara, agrees and ends the article with the following statement:

> "Lady Gaga is right. Keeping mental illness a secret gives power to the stigma
> that surrounds it and prevents so many people from accessing treatment. The

more we talk about these things, the more people will realize they can — and should — get help. We're so glad she's been able to seek therapy, and we hope she inspires anyone in a similar position to do the same." (McNamara, 2016h)

The tone here is straightforward and earnest. McNamara seems happy for Lady Gaga and confirms the artist's belief in the power of words for fighting stigma and shame surrounding mental illness, confirming a logic underlying most celebrity confessions of mental illness, something I discuss further in chapter three.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO CELEBRITY REPORTING

In this section I will compare the tone in the two magazines by looking at how they covered the same celebrity events, which reveal the different orientations of the two outlets. When it comes to celebrity reporting. *Cosmopolitan* tends to present news about celebrities suffering from mental illness more as traditional gossip concerned mostly with what a particular celebrity has been up to, whereas *Teen Vogue* often provides critical context and uses it as a pedagogic tool to talk about everyone who is afflicted by a specific diagnosis. For example, both outlets reported on a series of tweets made by model and actress Cara Delevingne in April 2016 where she wrote about her experience of depression (Storey, 2016; McNamara, 2016d). In the tweets in question, Delvingne clarifies rumors about her quitting modeling, that followed after she had previously spoken out about being depressed while modeling and having shifted to do more acting work. She wrote "I do not blame the fashion industry for anything" and "I suffer from depression and was a model during a particularly rough patch of self hatred." This was followed by two more tweets elaborating on her experience: "I am so lucky for the work I get to do but I used to work to try and escape and just ended up completely exhausting myself" and then "I am focusing on filming and trying to learn how to not pick apart my

every flaw. I am really good at that". *Cosmopolitan's* reporting about Delvingne's

Twitter activity focuses primarily on what she has to say about the modeling industry

(Storey, 2016). Their article starts with a brief summary of the acting work Delvingne has

done recently and the rumors about her quitting modeling. Next it features all of

Delvingne's relevant tweets (six in total) embedded into the article, before including a

previous quote from the model/actress about suffering from depression. It then concludes

by stating that Delvingne is back to modeling again, referencing an announcement that

she would be the "new face" of fashion brand Saint Laurent and including two Instagram

posts from the model/actress with photos from the campaign.

In contrast, the *Teen Vogue* article about the same tweets starts off by mentioning

Delvingne's history of speaking about depression, stating in the first paragraph that

"Being skinny and pretty, Cara has said, doesn't mean you can't be depressed, nor does

having a successful career you love" (McNamara, 2016d). After embedding four of the

tweets and quoting the one specifically about depression in the text, the *Teen Vogue*

writer cites research that "shows that depression is a disorder of the brain," before

elaborating:

> "Some research suggests that depression is caused by an imbalance of
> neurotransmitters, the chemicals nerve cells use to talk to each other, while other
> research puts some of the blame on genetics. This means that depression can
> affect anyone, no matter how seemingly lucky, successful, or beautiful they are"
> (McNamara, 2016d).

The paragraph includes hyperlinks to one article from *Psych Central* and one from

Nature: International weekly journal of science to back up the claims (Spielmans, 2015;

Hyman, 2014). What McNamara does here is validate Delvingne's experience by

evoking science and biomedicine to explain why someone who seemingly "has it all" can

develop depression. It also becomes a pedagogical moment about the causes of the diagnosis.

McNamara then quotes Delvingne when she previously spoke about her depression, before embedding Delvingne's tweet about turning to work as an escape. She then ends the piece with the model/actress' last tweet, which states "I am focusing on filming and trying to learn how to not pick apart my every flaw. I am really good at that" and comments "That's an important lesson to learn. Self-love is a journey, and so is depression. The good news is, neither is a journey you have to take alone" (McNamara, 2016d). The *Teen Vogue* piece adopts a caring tone that assumes that the reader is not only interested in the fact that a famous model and actress has been depressed, but also in what it means to be depressed and how one might get out of it.

Another instance of celebrity reporting that reveals the different orientations of the magazines is the coverage of artist Mariah Carey's revelation of living with bipolar II disorder in April 2018. The singer opened up in an interview with the celebrity magazine *People* and both *Cosmo* and *Teen Vogue* published their own articles recapping what she had revealed to the other magazine (a common form of celebrity reporting) (Baty, 2018; Belle, 2018). The two outlets use several of the same quotes from Carey and provide the same general background facts: the singer was first diagnosed in 2001 but did not seek treatment until recently, after having experienced "the hardest couple of years" she had ever been through. *Teen Vogue's* piece, however, is almost twice the length of *Cosmo's* and provides context to both mental health stigma and the bipolar II diagnosis. The *Teen Vogue* article starts with a three-sentence paragraph about the stigma surrounding mental health. Here the author describes how stigma might make the one suffering "feel isolated,

ashamed, and even terrified that no one else can understand your internal struggles" and

clarifies that mental illnesses "don't discriminate, and truly can affect anyone and

everyone, including celebrities who might seem to have 'perfect' lives" (Belle, 2018).

Carey and her newly revealed diagnosis is not named until the second paragraph, where

the facts of her case are stated. The *Cosmo* article, on the other hand, gets straight to the

point as it starts with a two-sentence paragraph that states when Carey first got her

diagnosis and that she did not get treatment at the time. In *Cosmo* stigma is only

mentioned indirectly when the singer is quoted as having said "I'm hopeful we can get to

a place where the stigma is lifted from people going through anything alone," but the

magazine does not provide its own commentary on the issue of mental health stigma, like

Teen Vogue does.

The two publications differ also in how they write about Carey's specific

diagnosis. *Teen Vogue* introduces the issue as follows:

> "She specifically struggles with bipolar II disorder, which involves periods of
> depression and hypomania, and is different than bipolar I. According to the
> National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), bipolar II is 'defined by a pattern of
> depressive episodes and hypomanic episodes, but not full-blown manic
> episodes.'" (Belle, 2018)

In this paragraph the phrase "bipolar II disorder" links to the WebMD site for this

specific diagnosis and the title "National Institute of Mental Health" links to that

organization's information page for the broader spectrum of bipolar disorder. In the

Cosmo article, the only definition of bipolar II that is given is that it "involves depression

and hypomania" (Baty, 2018).

Teen Vogue here seems concerned to give its readers direct information about

what bipolar II disorder entails, including differentiating it from other bipolar diagnoses,

as well as directing them to sites with more medical facts about the issue, including treatment options. *Cosmo*, on the other hand, is not as concerned about such details, assuming the reader knows or does not care about the difference between bipolar I and II, or what depression and hypomania entails.

This also speaks to the difference between the two publications when it comes to providing definitions of the ailments that are discussed. As mentioned above, clinical diagnoses are mentioned in the majority of pieces in both outlets from 2014 and onwards, which seems to suggest that the medical discourses around mental health became more mainstream and were assumed to be widely known from then on. In *Teen Vogue* the mention of clinical diagnoses is repeatedly accompanied by direct definitions of diagnoses, like the ones above, with links to medical sites like WebMD or featuring a quote from an expert (such as a doctor or counselor). This happens in 9% of the *Teen Vogue* articles, which is not an overwhelming amount, but compares to zero such instances in *Cosmopolitan*. In the latter outlet the definitional work is instead happening indirectly in the various ways the issues are being presented. As in the listicles discussed above, for example, the reader gets an idea of what it entails to be depressed or anxious by reading each item on the list. This is also pedagogical in that it provides symptoms and definitions, but these come primarily from the *Cosmo* writers' personal experiences and not from experts or textbook definitions as in *Teen Vogue*.

A CRITICAL AND A NOT-SO-CRITICAL STANCE TOWARDS

PSYCHOPHARMACOLOGY AND THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY

Another example that highlights the differences between the magazines is found in both of their coverage of a research report about the antidepressant drug Paroxetine, which is sold under the brand name Paxil. Comparing how the two outlets choose to write about it shows *Teen Vogue*'s critical stance and *Cosmo's* lack of one.

The study in question was a re-evaluation of a study about the efficacy and harms of Paxil in the treatment of major depression in teens that was conducted in North America from 1994 to 1998 and published as an article in *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (JAACAP) in 2001 (Keller, 2001; Le Noury et al, 2015). This study, named study 329, was funded by the pharmaceutical company that produced the drug, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), and concluded that Paxil was safe and efficient for use by children and teenagers (despite the drug only having received FDA-approval for adult use). Study 329 was then used by GSK from 1998-2003 to market the "off-label" use of Paxil in the treatment of children and adolescents, resulting in more than two million prescriptions being made out to teens in 2002 alone (Doshi, 2015). The study became controversial early on, with a FDA officer writing in a formal review of the trial that "on balance, this trial should be considered as a failed trial, in that neither active treatment group showed superiority over placebo by a statistically significant margin" (Mosholder, 2002). It was then revealed that the paper published in JAACAP under the name of 22 academics, with Brown University's then chief of psychiatry Martin Keller as the lead author, was in fact written by a PR firm hired by GSK and had been composed so as to downplay the negative effects of the drug (Doshi,

2015). In 2004 the FDA even added an explicit warning against prescribing Paxil to children and teens due to the risk of suicidal ideation and self-harm (Belluz, 2015). And in 2012 the US Department of Justice settled a lawsuit against GSK where they pleaded guilty to fraud in their off-label marketing of Paxil and other drugs, paying a record breaking $3 billion in fines (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012).

The study that was being covered by *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue* was published in 2015 and looks at the raw data behind the original study 329, definitely concluding that Paxil is no more efficient at treating depression in teens and kids than a placebo and that it can potentially lead to suicide and self-harm (Le Noury et al, 2015). What is interesting for the purposes of my study is the way the different magazines write about this research. *Cosmopolitan's* piece is titled "This Really Common Antidepressant Could Cause Life-Threatening Side Effects" and starts by stating "Chances are you know someone who takes some sort of medication to treat depression" before briefly accounting for the results of the study. In the fourth paragraph the article addresses the reader directly and states "if you're currently taking Paxil, you probably don't give AF [a fuck] about how or why the original analysis went wrong — you're wondering whether you should trash your prescription" (Narins, 2015). The question is answered firmly in the following paragraph: "The definitive answer is 'no'" followed by an explanation of how sudden withdrawal can increase risk of suicide, and a clarification that Paxil and other SSRIs are not being banned but that more research is called for. And if that was not enough, the piece ends with a clear injunction to only change your medications if there is a problem:

> "So if you've been taking Paxil for more than a few weeks and you're feeling perfectly fine, there's no reason to freak out — it's unlikely you'll have any

problems on your current dose. But if your antidepressant medication is making you feel way worse, talk to the doctor who prescribed it ASAP" (Narins, 2015).

Interestingly, the *Cosmopolitan* writer only mentions that the study had to do with teenage consumers of Paxil briefly when explaining that the new research "re-examined the medical records of 275 adolescent patients with major depression who were involved in the original study" (Narins, 2015). This leaves the impression that the research applies to all takers of the drug, even though the dangers being laid out in the re-evaluation of the original Study 329 only applies to teenagers, and not to adult consumers.

The *Teen Vogue* article about the study instead puts the adolescent aspect front and center with the headline "A Popular Antidepressant Is Actually Deadly for Teens." The writer of the piece, Julie Pennell, also highlights the malpractice of the drug company behind Paxil, starting the article with the following statement:

> "When you aren't feeling well and need to get better, you look to your doctor to make sure you get the right medicine. Your doctor looks at research to make sure he or she gives you the right prescription, but what if the research they're presented with is sneakily flawed?" (Pennell, 2015).

Pennell then attempts to account for the troubled history of study 329 and the marketing of Paxil to children and teens. She does this by mentioning pharmaceutical company GSK by name, that they were the ones funding the research and then presented it to downplay the risks and used it to push for the off-label use of the drug. The article also refers to the $3 billion fine paid by the company and the FDA warnings about the potential suicide risk for teens and children taking Paxil. *Cosmopolitan* did not mention any of these specific factors and only vaguely criticized how the pharmaceutical company acted by including a quote from one of the researchers behind the new study saying the

findings reveal "how industry hypes drug benefits that might not exist and goes about hiding harms" (Narins, 2015).

In the *Teen Vogue* article Pennell explains that the drug is still available for adults to use and then states:

> "drug companies are trying to change the law around marketing their medications for off-label uses. Seeing how dangerous Paxil could be for teens however, this can be a very slippery slope. Make sure that you research the medication your doctor prescribes to you, and even get a second opinion" (2015).

And after citing the *New York Times* on links between psychiatric drugs and violent acts including suicide (but also mentioning that experts say that there is not enough correlation to draw a straight line between drugs and action), she ends the article stating that "this is scary, and incredibly disheartening to hear that a major drug company would gamble with the lives of teens just for profits." Not only is the tone in this piece serious in *Teen Vogue'*s typical way, but it is also pointedly critical of this particular drug company and the pharmaceutical industry in general.

While the *Cosmopolitan* article focused primarily on the individual aspects of taking the drug, directly encouraging their readers to question Paxil only if they had had problems while taking it, the *Teen Vogue* piece highlights the role of the pharmaceutical company in a much clearer way. Like this, the latter outlet gives the reader a more comprehensive picture of all of the actors involved in developing and prescribing psychiatric medication.

This is also an example of *Teen Vogue* reporting on new research and not taking the findings at hand solely at their face value, but adding critique that puts them in perspective. In a similar vein, the outlet reported on new research that showed depression can cause physical pain in March 2016, and here the author points out that "while people

with depression have known for a long time that the disorder affects the whole body, this is the first study to prove that depression is actually a systemic disease rather than just a mental one" (McNamara, 2016c). Here *Teen Vogue* points to the discrepancies between the first-hand knowledge of many folks living with depression (about the physical effects of depression) and scientific research about the diagnosis. This becomes an indirect critique of the sometimes narrow frame of health research and foregrounds the lived experience of depression in favor of a blind trust in scientific institutions.

Another example comes from *Teen Vogue*'s reporting on research about depression and suicide rates among transgender kids, rates which the study at hand suggests can be lowered if trans kids are given support and shown acceptance. The *Teen Vogue* writer importantly points out that this disproves "theories that being transgender is inherently bad for mental health" and adds "though many didn't need research to tell them to accept their family members, neighbors, friends, or community members who are transgender, we now have the numbers to tell those who do" (McNamara, 2016a). Here McNamara manages to bring attention to the connection between mental health and structural discrimination, implicitly showing how transphobia directly affects the psychic wellbeing of transgender persons. In this way *Teen Vogue* might be seen as modeling a way of responsibly reporting on mental illness and its correlation with structural discrimination.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed the differences in style, tone, narrative, mode of address, and types of pedagogy and support around depression, anxiety, and general

mental health in *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue*. The general increase in coverage in both outlets and the mention of specific diagnoses from 2014 and onwards seem to suggest that mental illnesses were considered to be obvious aspects of contemporary life from that point on. This is significant because in previous eras mental health and illness have been stigmatized subjects that have not been acknowledged as parts of everyday life, and women's magazines have tended to focus on the positive and upbeat, rather than the negative aspects of life.

In *Cosmopolitan*, the tone tended to be lighthearted, distanced, and relatable, following the magazine's brand of a tongue-in-cheek approach to all aspects of life. Here the relatable self (Kanai, 2017a, 2017b; Gill and Kanai, 2018) that acknowledges the difficulties of contemporary life in a non-threatening way is clearly present, especially in the outlet's listicles that frequently use humor to disarm the seriousness of the topics covered. The approach here was often one that presented mental illness as both exceptional and common, clearly marked as different than "just being sad" but also as common as any physical illness. The *Cosmo* pieces that did take a more serious tone were the personal stories that tended to follow the victim-to-victor narrative found in anti-stigma campaigns, where the protagonist starts out by suffering, then receives a diagnosis and is finally salvaged by the help of medication and therapy. In addition to constructing psychiatry and psychology as the saviors, as traditional anti-stigma narratives, *Cosmo* offered examples that instead constructed mediated technologies like YouTube as the primary mode of support from suffering.

The overall tone in *Teen Vogue* was more serious, shown in the prevalence of general interest stories, a recurring critical perspective, the focus on support, and the

direct alignment with mental health awareness and advocacy discourses. By placing general interest stories, such as the one about incarcerated teen Bresha Meadows, alongside more personal and individual-focused pieces the reader learns to include also structural issues in the scope of mental health. The *Teen Vogue* pieces also tend to include critical commentary in addition to the straightforward reporting, which becomes a pedagogical moment about not only the prevalence and causes of various mental illnesses but also their connections to structural issues such as mass incarceration and racial oppression.

I then looked at how the two outlets covered the same celebrity events and science report. Here it became clear that *Teen Vogue* tended to provide readers with more context to the issues affecting the celebrities discussed, whereas *Cosmo* treated them more as traditional celebrity reporting about the specific events that passed. In their coverage of the Paxil study, *Cosmopolitan* wrote about the report in general terms that briefly accounted for the new research findings before advising their readers to only switch medications if they were having issues. *Teen Vogue* on the other hand took a critical stance towards the pharmaceutical company responsible for the deceptive marketing of the drug and accounted for several of the details about the legislative challenges to the company and the study, as well as the general practice of pharmaceutical companies prioritizing profits over individuals' health matters. Like this, the latter outlet gives their readers a comprehensive picture of all of the actors involved in developing and prescribing psychiatric medication, and encourages them to adopt a critical and "woke" mindset towards "big pharma."

The examination of these publications' mental health coverage shows that while *Cosmopolitan* tended to follow a script for postfeminist media - full of contradictions, covering serious topics in a tongue-in-cheek way that undermined any gravity, *Teen Vogue* did offer a more nuanced portrayal of mental illness that incited its readers to a more critical and engaged interpretation of dominant mental health paradigms.

The study of *Cosmopolitan's* and *Teen Vogue's* approach to mental health during this time further underscores the increase in conversations around mental health from 2015 and onwards. As I will discuss further in the following chapter in relation to celebrities, this can be tied to changes in branding strategies when it comes to relatability. In a changing media landscape, where social media is dominating more and more of people's media consumption, traditional media outlets like the ones discussed here are also turn to more intimate themes and topics, of which mental illness is the latest addition.

CHAPTER THREE: Celebrities: Intimacy, ordinariness, and self-transformation in the

health narratives of Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez

While magazines directly (and indirectly) tell us what to do, celebrity reporting

functions in a similar pedagogical way by showing audiences how famous people act in

certain situations. When celebrities share their personal health struggles, some scholars

have argued that they serve three main functions: education, inspiration and

activism/advocacy (Beck et al, 2015). This is the logic presented at face value by

celebrities themselves and those actively telling their stories - that when a famous person

comes out and reveals that they are suffering, they communicate to fans that it is okay to

feel that way and ideally inspire them to seek help. *Teen Vogue's* insistence on the

importance of speaking out and fighting stigma discussed in the previous chapter is an

example of this. So is Lady Gaga's statement in conjunction with revealing that she lives

with PTSD that "the most inexpensive and perhaps the best medicine in the world is

words" (McNamara, 2016h). Other scholars have added that celebrity health narratives

also do ideological work in that they present "images and ideas about how we should

interpret, manage and value mental illness as well as the identities of those who suffer

from it" (Franssen, 2019, p. 91; see also Bell, 2008; Fisher, 2011; Harper, 2009; Holmes,

2015).

This chapter focuses on female celebrities who have spoken out about their own

mental illness, by looking at the very public struggles of singers Demi Lovato and Selena

Gomez, and also briefly discusses the employment of a sad aesthetics by artist Lana del

Rey. These cases and the overall rise in celebrity expressions about mental health can be

tied to a turn in celebrity branding around authenticity and intimacy. Together with the

previous chapter, it shows how media and popular cultural attention to mental health is linked to changes in branding strategies around relatability. This chapter shows that, just as there was an increase in magazine coverage of mental illness from 2015 and on, there was a spike in celebrity confessions about various mental health diagnoses.

Method and overview of archive

Through Google searches and the archives of celebrity reporting outlets like *People* magazine, TMZ, and Celebitchy.com I have mapped out 105 female celebrities who have spoken out about various experiences of mental illness during the 2008-2018 decade (see graph 4 for changes over time and table 1 for a list of all celebrities included). I have culled these primarily from compilation articles such as "39 Celebrities Who Have Opened Up About Mental Health" (Roberts, 2018) and "19 Celebrities Who Have Spoken Out About Their Anxiety" (van Eijk, 2015) (see also Altshul, 2016; Bain, 2019; Felson, 2018; Forstadt, 2018; Gavilanes, 2018; Grant and Gomez, 2019; Hugel, 2015; Naftulin, 2016; Nelson, 2018; Proudfoot, 2019; Ratini, 2018; Selzer, 2018; Singh, 2019; Tannenbaum, 2017; Truschel, 2019; Yagoda, 2019a; and Yagoda, 2019b). These listicles appeared on the sites of magazines like *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Seventeen*, *Harper's Bazaar*, the *Hollywood Reporter*, and *Good Housekeeping* as well as web only publications like *Refinery29*, *Bustle*, *Buzzfeed*, and *Insider.* An additional few were also found on health specific sites like WebMD, EverydayHealth.com, Psycom, and Health.com. I have focused here primarily on US celebrities or those with a global appeal. 78% of these women were white, 12% black, 5% latinx and 5% mixed race.

Among these the most common diagnosis mentioned was anxiety, with 33 of the 105 celebrities talking primarily about that affliction. Second was depression, with 28 stars saying they suffered from that, and 12 celebrities having talked about having both depression and anxiety. There were 10 vocal accounts of living with postpartum depression and seven about bipolar disorder. Other diagnoses and experiences that occurred were social anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-harm, eating disorders, and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Among these categories several overlapped, meaning the same person might have talked about having multiple diagnoses (see table 1 which also includes diagnoses). There were also a few cases were stars had only talked about mental health in general, but still made it to several of the compilation lists, and they are also included here.

It might be worth noting that male celebrities have also been outspoken about their struggles, but not in as high a number as their female counterparts, with 46 male stars speaking out during the 2008-2018 decade according to my research. Since my larger project is concerned with discourses around mental illness in relation to gender and postfeminism, I am taking the liberty to not discuss those male celebrities here. Female celebrities in particular have also been central in "testing dominant social norms" (Holmes and Negra, 2011, p. 3) and looking at them is thus indicative also of larger discourses around mental health.

Changes over time

The majority of these celebrity confessions took place towards the end of the decade, with one each year during 2008-2010, and then staying in the single digits up

until 2015 when 15 stars spoke out, up to 23 in 2016, 23 in 2017 and then down to 22 in

2018 (see graph 4). The stars included here have all spoken first hand about their own

experiences of depression, anxiety, or other diagnoses. These confessions primarily took

place in interviews with magazines (66% of the cases), but also at times on social media,

with stars revealing diagnoses directly to their fans on their personal accounts (in 11% of

the cases), like the case of Cara Delvingne discussed in the previous chapter. Some also

happened in memoirs (that were subsequently reported on by media covering celebrities;

5% of confessions), first-person essays in the popular press (5%), press statements in

relation to a rehab or hospital stay (4%), participation in mental health awareness

campaigns (4%), on personal apps (3%), and on reality television (2%).

Multiple of the stars have spoken about their issues several times, but I have only

counted them once, and the numbers per year refer to when they talked about it the first

time (see table 1). I made this decision based on the assumption that the first time

someone spoke out indicates what the perceptions around mental health and illness

looked like in popular culture at the time.

Looking at celebrity reporting at the start of the decade, a lot of it was dedicated

to female stars who seemed to go through mental distress, but they rarely came forward

themselves to speak about what they were dealing with, instead it was the media

speculating about what particular diagnosis someone might have had. This creates a

different kind of celebrity health narrative than when the star herself speaks out, since

speculations from others always can be denied, but first hand statements tend to be

carefully crafted to fit within the celebrity's overall brand. Su Holmes and Diane Negra

(2011) have pointed to the "intensely and negatively scrutinizing public gaze [that] was

trained so often on female celebrities in a practice that reached fever pitch in 2008" (p. 5).

A fever pitch that was not an "accident of historical timing" but a way of misdirecting

anxieties and blame for the global financial crisis and instead position "female celebrity

as itself an overvalued and depreciating asset" (Holmes and Negra, 2011, p. 5). In this

way, famous women took the heat for the public's anxieties about the financial system

and the tabloidized press used its investigative functions to examine female "trainwrecks"

rather than economic institutions.

The trainwrecks that received scrutinized attention were often suspected of

suffering from mental health challenges. For example, one of the most closely watched

public breakdowns at the start of 2008 was that of singer Britney Spears, which (could be

said) to have peaked in February 2007 when she shaved her head in front of scores of

paparazzi photographers who spread the news worldwide overnight (Luckett, 2010).

During 2008 Spears was committed to a psychiatric ward twice and then put under a

conservatorship in which her father Jamie Spears has ultimate authority over her finances

and most personal decisions, something she is still living under more than ten years later

(Newberry, 2019).[6]

2010-2011 saw the peak of former child actor Lindsay Lohan's life descending

into chaos, with her spending time in rehab and jail multiple times (Duke, 2012). Around

this time the world also saw singer Amy Winehouse rise to stardom and break down in

public, ending with her death by alcohol poisoning in 2011 (Polaschek, 2018). In 2013

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[6] According to 2019 court documents, Spears' father has "the power to negotiate business opportunities, sell her property and restrict her visitors. He can file for restraining orders against those he believes threaten his daughter's stability." Additionally, "he oversees much of the minutiae of Spears' life. Every purchase she makes must be logged in annual court reports of her spending" (Newberry, 2019). The extent to which Spears was ok with this arrangement was the topic of the #FreeBritney movement that spread among her fans in the spring of 2019 (Newberry, 2019) and was further revived in the summer of 2020.

and 2014 former child actor Amanda Bynes went through a very public breakdown

involving several highly publicized drug binges and court battles with her parents

(Koman, 2014a; Ruiz, 2013). Several of these female celebrities appeared among the sad

girls on Tumblr that I discuss in the following chapter (see Got-you-where-i-want-you,

2017, Infinitystorms, 2014, and Sweet-Despondency, 2016a). On this digital platform

users would post images of these stars (often in states of distress) in ways that idolized

them and reinforced a melancholic notion of sadness as romantic, mystical, and

inpirational.

In most of these cases of public breakdown, the speculations about the famous

women's mental health was done by observers and not by the women themselves. What

started to change around 2015 was that celebrities themselves began to "come out" and

address their own mental health in large numbers. One example of how attitudes about

celebrities and mental illness changed towards the end of the decade is singer Mariah

Carey's revelation of a bipolar II diagnosis to *People* magazine in April 2018 (Cagle,

2018) (the coverage of which I discussed in the previous chapter). Throughout her 25

year career, the singer had gone through two highly publicized marriages, a divorce, and

a televised mental breakdown (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 150) but did not speak out

directly about her mental health until 2018, despite having received her diagnosis already

in 2001. The case of actress Brittany Snow is another example. She opened up about her

experiences of anorexia and depression to *People* magazine in 2007 (Ingrassia, 2007), but

the public's reaction was so harsh that she decided to take a break from the spotlight. In

interview with *InStyle* magazine in 2019 she admitted that she had spoken "too early,"

saying that "I think there was still a stigma around sharing so much truth, and it kind of

got seen as me being self-indulgent or trying to gain attention" (Truong, 2019).

Something her interviewer describes as "Snow was speaking out about mental health and pulling back the curtain on a deeply personal experience during a time when society was much less receptive to conversations about mental illness" (Truong, 2019). This reflects not only an awareness in the media in 2019 about mental health issues and how to write about them, but also an idea of the media at large as now being more responsible than it used to be in regards to these topics. Rather than engage in sensationalist coverage of breakdowns and trainwrecks, celebrity reporting assumed a more careful approach to issues of mental health, indirectly informed by discourses of mental health awareness and advocacy. The increase in conversations around mental illness in popular media like *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue*, and among celebrities, served to normalize issues like depression and anxiety. One can imagine that portraying a suffering celebrity as an outrageous trainwreck became less appealing, as it in the process of normalization also is assumed that stars and regular people alike are afflicted by the issues. Portraying stars who live with mental illness as something to be shocked by (as the sensationalist trainwreck coverage does) assumes that the reader cannot relate to what the celebrity is going through and positions the audience at a distance, gawking at the spectacle of a famous person breaking down. When mental illnesses instead are considered common and something that can affect everyone, the coverage of celebrities going through such things takes a relatable approach that serves to present the famous person as "just like us" in their suffering. This is also indicative of a larger shift towards more ordinariness in celebrity branding and reporting, something propelled by the prevalence of social media, which I discuss further in the following section.

It is important to note that celebrities suffering from mental illnesses is not a new phenomenon. In the early modern and romantic period, madness was a sign of the melancholy philosopher-artist and of the genius of the Byronic iconoclastic artist (Steptoe, 1998). The connection between mental distress and creativity and talent continued into the 20th century (Harper, 2009) and at the start of the 21st century, "psychic turmoil is [still] taken as a sign of artistic authenticity" (Franssen, 2020, p. 95). Often "suffering, dysfunction or the personal flaw, once concealed but now revealed to the public" are just as important elements to the celebrity story as high achievement (Nunn and Biressi, 2010, p. 53). Stories about stars who "make it through" often encourage values of individual autonomy and self-mastery (Lerner, 2006, p. 8) and end up reinforcing 'neoliberal ideologies of meritocracy and competitive individualism' (Harper, 2006, p. 314).

Narratives of celebrities struggling with mental illnesses have tended to be heavily gendered, working mostly in the favor of male stars. Nina K. Martin (2015) notes that the breakdowns of male celebrities often are considered "fascinating, demonstrating behavior that shores up stereotypical hetero-masculinity (promiscuity and cheating, aggression and rage, linked with drugs and alcoholism)" (p. 31). Overcoming scandal in this context is a sign of heroism, while "women's attempts to overcome their foibles are viewed as signifiers of tragic instability and madness" (Martin, 2015, p. 31). Gaston Franssen (2020) points out that the same "ideology of competitive individualism" is at play for both male and female breakdowns, but "with clear gendered differences: psychological instability for male artists is associated with perseverance, credibility and authenticity; for female artists, mental breakdown is seen as a sign of failure, inherent

instability or a lack of resilience" (p. 95; see also Bell, 2011; Holmes, 2015; McLean, 2002).

Franssen analyzes Demi Lovato's celebrity health narrative and argues that hers is an exceptional story within the traditionally gendered discourses mentioned above, because she has managed to incorporate mental distress into her brand in a way that has "ensured that she is perceived as a self-confident artist and a successful entrepreneur of self-care" (2020, p. 96). I will return to Franssen's analysis of Lovato below and build upon that with my own. Part of my argument is that Lovato's story (of repeated breakdown, recovery, and reinvention) is becoming less exceptional and more common among female stars.

A changing celebrity media landscape

It is also worth noting how celebrity reporting itself changed throughout the decade and the role of social media in its evolvement. In 2008 celebrity journalism was dominated by blogs like *Perez Hilton* and *TMZ*, which were ready to publish the most sensationalist stories, with little concern over how it would affect the stars themselves. Celebrity scholar Anne Helen Petersen (2019) has described how celebrities experienced this as being (almost) completely out of control, with paparazzi willing to step over dead bodies to get valuable photos of their subjects (a spate of car crashes involving photographers and celebrities underscored this sentiment). As the decade progressed, however, stars learned to utilize their own social media channels to circumvent the control of the paparazzi and the unscrupulous gossip blogs. Toward the end of the decade

traditional outlets were reporting on what the stars were doing on social media, creating stories based on celebrities' Instagram posts and tweets (Petersen, 2019).

This goes hand in hand with Marwick and boyd's (2011) analysis of celebrity practice on Twitter, which they argue takes place through "the appearance and performance of 'backstage' access" (p. 139). They conceptualize celebrity as "an organic and ever-changing *performative practice*" which involves "ongoing maintenance of a fan base, performed intimacy, authenticity and access, and construction of a consumable persona" (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 140, italicization in original). "Micro-celebrities," individuals who have built up a devoted audience on digital platforms, are pioneers and masters of this practice, but other kinds of celebrities have come to adopt the same methods to maintain their fanbases with the rise of social media.

The performed intimacy is especially important for this research project, and Marwick and boyd argue that celebrities reveal seemingly personal information on Twitter to establish "a sense of intimacy between participant and follower" (2011, p. 139). Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi (2010) argue similarly that an "'ideology of intimacy' has formed the conditions in which the celebrity, along with other public figures and the ordinary person, now labour as emotional subjects in the public arena" (p. 54).

Since Marwick and boyd's 2011 article and Nunn and Biressi's 2010 piece, this way of practicing celebrity has only become more established and takes place not only Twitter but also on Instagram and other social media platforms. Barker, Gill, and Harvey (2018) also argue that "we live in a world *suffused and saturated with representations of intimate relationships*" (p. 24, italicization in original). Even though their examination of

mediated intimacy primarily concerns romantic relationships and sex, the point about the domineering presence of intimate relationships carries over to issues like mental health, in that it explains the naturalness with which details of previously "personal" and "private" topics are now discussed out in the open.

Defining celebrity

Another important aspect to keep in mind when discussing celebrity is its role as an economic condition that produces value and profit, and that involves a range of practices beyond the celebrity's professional employment (i.e. as musician or actor for example). During the first part of the 20th century the primary value of the Hollywood celebrity was to differentiate film products and generate attention for a film, but as the studio system collapsed and the entertainment business grew, a whole industry emerged that "found ways to generate value from the celebrity's whole life on and off the screen, creating lifestyle synergies between stars, products, services and events" (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016, pp. 197-198).

The monetary value of the celebrity has always been dependent on the audience that it can deliver. Alison Hearn and Stephanie Schoenhoff (2016) examine how celebrity has changed as the measurements of audiences have become more and more specified. Various tools have been used to measure audience engagement, from the Nielsen ratings of television viewership, the Q score that measures familiarity and likeability, and the Klout score which claimed to measure and score the totality of a person's social media impact. The value a celebrity was able to generate moved from box office and record sales into a larger field of endorsed products and onto direct marketing of their own

commodities. For example, instead of endorsing or appearing in an ad for a perfume, celebrities began producing their own perfumes (or other wares) for direct sale to audiences, something that became common in the 1990s when celebrities "began to configure themselves explicitly as brands" (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016, p. 200). Within celebrity branding, the process of value generation is strengthened "because it relies so completely on the ongoing and infinitely malleable distinctiveness of the celebrity's 'personal' lifestyle" (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016, p. 200). Here authenticity becomes one of the most important elements determining the value of a celebrity, "beyond the roles played or music created, today's celebrity brand is predicated on convincing consumers of the authenticity of their inherent 'being' beyond the limelight" (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016, p. 200). This emphasis on authenticity is only heightened when it comes to micro-celebrities and influencers, for whom the "promise of authenticity" is a central aspect of their strong relation to their followers, the strength of which is what determines how much monetary value is invested in them by marketers and advertising agencies (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017). In other words, the increased intimacy between celebrities and fans is closely tied to a longer history of monetizing the celebrity's whole life by presenting a "real" image.

The "relatability" of *Cosmopolitan*'s mental health coverage, which manages to touch on difficult subjects but does so in a non-threatening and distanced way, fits well into this marketable authenticity. One can presume that a celebrity would want to appear real to convey authenticity and intimacy, but they would not want to do so in a way that presents too much difficulty or pain, because doing so might risk the audience/fan becoming uncomfortable and no longer acting as a consumer of whatever product is

being sold in conjunction with the celebrity brand. The audience/fan still has to act as a consumer and generate monetary value, but they might be deterred from doing so if they get too sad or down from hearing about a celebrity's personal struggle. By presenting difficulties in distanced and relatable ways a celebrity can appear authentic without becoming "too much."

Additionally, whether or not a social relationship is perceived as authentic or real is often determined based on the strength of the "commitment to the 'inner psychological concerns of each person'" (Nunn and Biressi, 2010, p. 49). The media discourse in which celebrities share their own experiences of depression and anxiety is thus one where fans are expecting greater personal connection to their idols. This creates a context for celebrity practice where disclosing private details is not out of the ordinary, but instead part of the norm. For celebrities, telling the world that you have suffered through depression might no longer be something that taints your image, but in fact improves it by contributing to the authenticity of your performance of self. As such, disclosing details about one's mental health might even be a strategical choice in order to maintain a close relationship with fans.

The tendency to share issues of mental health is also seen in the world of micro-celebrities, where several of the biggest stars in the world of beauty and lifestyle Youtubers have spoken openly and repeatedly about their struggles with anxiety (DeMoss, 2015; Ferguson, 2017; Tonic, 2016). Despite the still dominant perception of social media as "an archive of endlessly positive self-documentation" (Berryman and Kavka, 2018, p. 85), among micro-celebrities on sites like YouTube the display of negative affect is increasingly common. Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka (2018)

present several examples of crying and anxiety vlogs made by YouTubers with large followings and argue that the displays of negative affects here become productive, in that they "cement authenticity, offer (self-)therapy and strengthen ties of intimacy between YouTubers and their followers" (p. 87). An unfiltered and "raw" video of someone crying becomes in this context a sign of realness and vulnerability that reinforces the bonds between micro-celebrity and fan. In relation to the more traditional celebrities I discuss in this chapter, the continued success of micro-celebrities on platforms like YouTube influence the way that more traditional celebrities come to construct their own celebrity image. This includes a heightened (in comparison to previous eras) intimacy between celebrity and fans, that expresses itself in things like more openness about mental health struggles.

Lastly, this shift to more and more intimate channels of communication between celebrity and fans is also part of a turn towards ordinariness in celebrity culture. Joshua Gamson (2011) notes that the celebrity narrative that positions the famous as ordinary and "just like us" has long been used to make celebrities more relatable and invite identification with them. The elevation of the ordinary has intensified from the 1990s and onwards, first with the rise of reality TV and its practice of making stars out of ordinary people, and then with the Internet and the possibility to become famous without the traditional celebrity industry (Gamson, 2011, pp. 1065-1067). This has only intensified with the rise of self-branding and the emergence of the social media influencer (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017).

<u>Spotlight on pop stars</u>

Both Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez have been prominent mental health advocates that have appeared frequently in my archive. I chose to focus on the two of them in this chapter because they have spoken about their issues repeatedly in very visible ways. Both of them were also child stars who made their debut on the children's show *Barney and Friends* (1992-2009). After getting to know each other on the television series, Lovato and Gomez developed a close friendship that became highly publicized - shown on magazine covers, in a series of homemade YouTube videos by the two stars, the made-for-TV-movie *Princess Protection Program*, and several unauthorized biographies about the BFFs (Projansky, 2014, pp. 73-75; Ryals, 2008; Rutherford, 2009; Willen, 2020). As girl and teen celebrities, Lovato and Gomez have been at the center of US media culture's fascination with girls. As Anita Harris (2004) argues, the girls seen in popular media tend to be either "can-do" girls who are confident and have almost infinite capacity for success, or "at-risk" girls who lack self-esteem and engage in risky behavior. Both of these figures circulate together in media culture as examples to follow - where the at-risk girl functions as a warning to the can-do girl, reminding her "that failure is an ever-lurking possibility that must be staved off through sustained application" (Harris, 2004, p. 27). These two tropes come together in the above mentioned figure of the female trainwreck, a phenomenon Sarah Projansky (2014) in her work on girls in media culture calls the "'crash-and-burn' girl" (p.4). This is the girl who "has it all, but who—through weakness and/or the inability to live with the pressure of celebrity during the process of growing up—makes a mistake and therefore faces a spectacular descent into at-risk status" (Projansky, 2014, p. 4). In her study of spectacular girls, Projansky puts Lovato in

the fold of the "crash-and-burn" girl who had potential but fell into at-risk-status when she was involved in a scandal and subsequently went to rehab (more on that below). Gomez, on the other hand, is defined as a "super can-do girl" who is glamorous but playful and "the kind of girl anyone would want to be around" (Projansky, 2014, p. 75).[7]

What becomes interesting for my project is that Lovato since her 2010 breakdown and revelation of a bipolar diagnosis, eating disorder and substance use addiction has made several comebacks and has managed to successfully incorporate her mental distresses into her brand in a way that recasts her as a can-do girl again. And Gomez has since 2016 been open about her struggles with depression and anxiety, effectively folding that into her image, most recently (April, 2020) revealing that she had received a bipolar diagnosis (Vivinetto, 2020).

Lovato is an example of someone who first spoke out about her issues earlier in the decade, at a time when it was not as common for (especially female) celebrities to be outspoken about mental illnesses. Her two tell-all documentaries, many statements, and engagements with mental health advocacy provided me with a rich archive from which to study how attitudes about mental health have taken shape over the decade. Gomez, who has only been open about her struggles since 2016, is instead an example of the late-in-the-decade openness around mental health issues, and her statements around them reveal the state of the more recent and mental-illness-aware media culture.

In addition to both having been very visible around issues of mental health, their positions in girl culture as crash-and-burn and can-do girls respectively make their stories

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[7] Projansky also discusses the racialized aspect of Gomez's celebrity at length, arguing that her Mexican-American identity is downplayed in most media coverage, but her visibility still "potentially opens up reflection on mixed identities and provides a potential point of identification for mixed audiences" (2014, p. 93).

illustrative of how a postfeminist media culture that urges girls and women to be confident and empowered grapples with issues of mental illness. In the discussion that follows I intend to show how Lovato and Gomez's celebrity health narratives, and the numerous confessions from female stars about their own mental health issues from 2015 and onwards, seem to suggest that the ideal postfeminist and neoliberal subject who works on herself constantly to achieve success has some room for failure as long as it is successfully overcome.

DEMI LOVATO: Troubled Star and Queen of Re-Invention

Demi Lovato started her career in 2002, at the age of 10, on the children's television show *Barney and Friends* and had her breakthrough in the Disney Channel musical television film *Camp Rock* (2008) and its sequel *Camp Rock 2: The Final Jam* (2010). In addition to her television work, Lovato has released six studio albums: *Don't Forget* (2008), *Here We Go Again* (2009), *Unbroken* (2011), *Demi* (2013), *Confident* (2015), and *Tell Me You Love Me* (2017); all of which debuted in the top five of the Billboard 200 (Trust, 2017). According to a September 2019 article on the magazine *Women's Health's* website, the singer's net worth is about $33 million (Miller, 2019). In other words, her artistry is a big business involving a lot of money and employing a big team.

Lovato rose to fame at the age of 16 after starring in the Disney production *Camp Rock*, leading her to go on tour with the, at the time very popular, boy band the Jonas Brothers, who were also associated with the film and its sequel. In October 2010, after a performance in Columbia, Lovato punched one of her backup dancers and abruptly left

the tour to go straight to rehab in Illinois. At the time it was reported that she was seeking

treatment for "emotional and physical issues" (Hunter, 2010). In April the following year,

three months after leaving the treatment center, Lovato revealed in an interview with

People magazine that, after seeking care for an eating disorder and self-harm, she had

also received a bipolar disorder diagnosis (Cotliar, 2011). In the trajectory of a celebrity

breakdown, the tabloid press often sets the stage for how the audience will respond to the

scandal, but the stars themselves have the power to talk back and confess or deny rumors

(Bell, 2011; Holmes, 2015). Franssen (2020) notes that Lovato went far beyond merely

salvaging her reputation, instead "she embraced her mental struggle and diagnosis with

bipolar disorder and incorporated them into her celebrity narrative" (p. 96). Barely a year

after revealing her diagnosis, in March 2012, the documentary *Demi Lovato: Stay Strong*

was released on MTV (Russo, 2012). Here Lovato's fans got to follow the star as she

prepared for and subsequently went on the *Unbroken* tour, to promote her newly released

album. The documentary features several long interviews with Lovato and presents her as

a star that has hit rock bottom but come out stronger on the other side. The image used to

promote it, which also frames its commercial breaks, shows the inside of Lovato's wrists,

one of which has "stay" and the other "strong" tattooed on them (see figure 3). The film

focuses mostly on the singer's eating disorder and self-harm behavior, but also mentions

the bipolar diagnosis she received while in treatment.

Franssen's (2020) analysis of Lovato's celebrity health narrative focuses

primarily on this 2012 documentary. He compellingly identifies three levels on which

Lovato's recovery is narrativized in the film: "it entails a narrative of private struggle,

which authenticates her crisis; a narrative of diagnosis, which reifies and externalizes the

cause of her breakdown; and a narrative of self-improvement and self-transformation, which recalibrates her celebrity image" (p. 96). I will return to these levels in my analysis of Lovato's second tell-all documentary, *Simply Complicated.*

Stay Strong also features several interviews with Lovato's fans before and after the shows of her tour. They talk about how they are inspired by the singer's honesty about her struggles and express a sentiment of "If Demi can do it so can I". One fan says "When Demi came out about her issues and about the cutting and the eating disorders I was just really inspired and that's why I told my parents about it and that's why I went to treatment", exemplifying the power of a celebrity telling her story. In this framing Lovato's mental distress and her willingness to speak openly about it becomes a "positive" aspect of her story, in that it is doing "good work" by inspiring others to get better. This is reflected in a scene where Lovato is seen leading her team in prayer before the start of a show. Here she not only expresses the hope that "we do our best performance possible," but also requests God to "take whatever pain is inside these audience members [and] let them have fun tonight." In another scene Lovato is shown performing as her voiceover says she "wasn't given this voice just to sing" but that "there is a bigger picture and that is to use your voice, inspire people and to get people through their day and problems and to pick people up when they are down." Lovato's honesty about her struggles becomes a lifeline to her fans, who through her can acknowledge their own problems.

A few others speak about how inspired they are by Lovato's show of strength and confidence, echoing the postfeminist confidence (cult) described by Gill and Orgad (2015) and foreshadowing Lovato's 2015 album titled simply *Confident*. The

documentary being titled *Stay Strong*, the name of the tour she is shown doing in the film

being *Unbroken*, and the subsequent album being titled *Confident* all reinforces the focus

of much popular media culture at the time to encourage women to be strong, empowered,

and in charge.

From crash-and-burn to can-do

In her analysis of three British female celebrities who had been labeled "bad

girls" during the 1990s and early 2000s, Emma Bell (2011) argues that they used

disclosures of mental illness to remove the "bad" label. According to her, "after a period

of media antagonism (and subsequent cultural and market devaluation), 'bad girl'

celebrities can re-gain public attention and cultural value through revelations of mental

illness" (Bell, 2011, p. 199). The stars that Bell looks at ("Spice Girl Geri Halliwell,

"ladette" Gail Porter, and "wild child" Kerry Katona" 2011, p. 201) gained their original

fame in the 1990s as part of the "Girl Power" and "ladette" wave in British popular

culture at the time. Their disclosures of mental illness happened in the late 1990s and

early 2000s (and were thus not part of my archive here) through autobiographical reality

and life products such as memoirs and reality television shows, and were framed as

repudiations of the pop-feminism associated with their original claims to fame. Bell

describes how the confessions did give these women renewed attention and another shot

at stardom, but they were often accompanied by derisions from both tabloid press and

serious media. She concludes that "the cultural interest in these women depends on their

being simultaneously in and out of control with regard to the circulation and contours of

their public images" (Bell, 2011, p. 221), where their attempts at regaining control of

their public images through mental illness revelations were derided and ridiculed in the media. This makes the celebrities Bell studies different from the cases I have examined, where the stars have largely managed to maintain control over their health narratives. The discrepancies can be attributed both to the variation of national context (I focus on a US context and the British tabloids tend to be more ruthless in their celebrity coverage than American ones) and a shift in the mid 2010s towards more acceptance towards mental health awareness.

Nevertheless, what Lovato does in the 2012 documentary *Stay Strong* could be read through the lens that Bell describes. The move to put out her own account of her "breakdown" and rehab-stay can be seen as a way to take control over the public narrative about her personal life so as not to be labeled a "bad girl". By coming out and talking about her struggles, she sidesteps outsider speculations about what may have caused her distress. This documentary also functions as a useful tool for Lovato to step away from the wholesome branding of the Disney channel from which she had her original claim to fame, and frame the launch of the album *Unbroken* (2011) with which she is shown touring in the film. This album has a more mature, grown-up, RnB-vibe compared to the singer's previous two albums which were in a more pop-rock vein (something Lovato herself discusses in the accompanying audio commentary to *Unbroken*). The revelation of mental illness struggles serves to cement Lovato's authenticity as a "real" person behind the wholesomeness of the Disney brand. The title of the album, *Unbroken*, quite literally reflects the "can-do girl" trope of confidence, resilience, and independence (Harris, 2004). It is almost as if Lovato's team produced the *Stay Strong* documentary to clean up her image and re-do it as a "can-do" woman whose

experiences only add to her appeal of strength and confidence. Something that Franssen

(2020) picks up on in his analysis of the documentary, which he describes as "a

representation *as well as* a performance of a process of self-management, producing an

updated, better 'self' for Lovato" (p. 98, italicization in original). This leads to the

successful incorporation of her "crash-and-burn" status into a "can-do" narrative,

something that the star will do again with her second documentary and subsequent

relapse.

In the years following the release of *Stay Strong* Lovato kept working and

releasing albums at the same time as she established herself as a mental health advocate.

This included things like establishing a scholarship program in the name of her late father

to help people pay for treatment at the CAST Recovery center where Lovato herself had

gotten support (HuffPost, 2013) and releasing a book of affirmations (*Staying Strong:*

365 Days a Year, 2013) that reached the number one spot in the "Advice, How-to &

Miscellaneous"-category of the New York Times bestseller list and was then followed by

a companion book (*Staying Strong: A Journal*, 2014)(Macrae, 2013; Lovato, 2014a).

These two books and their success reveal how Lovato and her team managed to fold her

painful experiences into the Lovato-brand, further authenticate her struggles, and quite

literally profit off of them in book sales. In 2014 she also embarked on the "Mental

Health Listening and Engagement Tour," sponsored by a pharmaceutical company and a

few mental health organizations (Stutz, 2014). In 2016 she announced that she would

host seminars with fans to discuss mental health issues as part of her tour (Puckett, 2016);

then appeared at the Democratic National Convention to give a speech about mental

health in conjunction with endorsing Hillary Clinton (Chan, 2016); and in September she

revealed in an interview with CBS that she co-owns part of the rehab center where she

received treatment (CBS News, 2016). And in 2017 she executive produced a

documentary for the mental health advocacy organization *Be Vocal* (Ahern, 2017), which

grew out of the "Mental Health Listening and Engagement Tour" she had done in 2014

and 2015 (Be Vocal, n.d.).

Simply Complicated

In October 2017 Lovato released her second "tell-all" documentary, *Demi Lovato:*

Simply Complicated, to coincide with the release of the album *Tell Me You Love Me*, this

time on YouTube (Lovato, 2017; see figure 4). The fact that Lovato chose to release her

second autobiographical documentary on this platform rather than a traditional distributor

shows the leverage of YouTube as a media actor but also the influence of the

microcelebrity vloggers who have made the platform what it is today. *Stay Strong* was

released on MTV in 2012 and was impossible to find anywhere online during my

research (I ended up getting access to it via a doctoral colleague who also works in

television and was able to get a copy through his job). *Simply Complicated*, on the other

hand, is still available worldwide on YouTube, making this version of Lovato's celebrity

health narrative as accessible to fans as the videos of native YouTube stars.

This documentary starts with Lovato stating: "I actually had anxiety around this

interview …. because the last time I did an interview this long I was on cocaine,"

referring to the 2012 *Stay Strong* documentary. This sets the stage for this newer film to

be "rawer" and more "real" than the previous one, which is supported by Lovato's

repeated confessions of manipulating those around her and saying "I wasn't working my

program. I wasn't ready to get sober. I was sneaking it on planes, sneaking it in

bathrooms, sneaking it throughout the night."

Lovato and her team re-tell the story of her initial breakdown while on tour with

the Jonas Brothers in more detail than in the earlier documentary and with input from the

Jonas Brothers themselves. Her manager, Phil McIntyre, is also featured speaking

extensively to the darkness beneath the surface of Lovato's life during 2012 and 2013,

while she was telling the world that she was sober and healed. The life coach Mike Bayer

(author of several self-help books and an expert contributor of the Dr Phil television

show), who is one of the founders of the CAST-treatment centers and who was hired by

McIntyre to help Lovato get out of her addiction, is also interviewed at length in this

documentary. McIntyre, Bayer, and Lovato herself speak at length about how difficult

she was to work with during her darkest days, and they all describe the moment when it

came to a breaking point. McIntyre, the manager, recounts how he had gotten Lovato's

entire team onboard to stage a kind of intervention, where they told the singer that if she

did not commit to getting better he and the entire team would leave. Lovato responded by

crying and asking what she could do, to which point Bayer tells her to hand over her

cellphone. In a montage of McIntyre and Bayer recounting the event, they describe how

Lovato smashed her phone and then put it in a glass of water to finalize its destruction.

As he is holding Lovato's old phone, McIntyre says "this was the gateway to everything,

this was the wrong people, it was drug dealers, it was a lot of the negative influences in

her life were coming through the cellphone". And as if to emphasize that this was not

Lovato being forced to give up her autonomy, the singer herself comments next that "I

think that approached worked for me because, it sounds silly but it was the beginning of

the process of surrendering. At the end of the day it was my decision." Next, Bayer and McIntyre describe the bizarre circumstances of Lovato's life at the time, when she was serving as a judge on the reality television program *X-factor*. Bayer says "Meanwhile she's a judge on *X-factor*. She's 19 years old and she's in her first year of sobriety." McIntyre continues: "What nobody knows is that while she was a judge she's living in a sober apartment, with roommates, she's having to do chores, she has no cellphone. She is completely and totally submitted to the process of recovery." Next Lovato herself says: "You really have to lean into the people who are trying to support you. Like my family, like Mike [Bayer] and Phil [McIntyre]. You know you really have to surrender because that's when the change is gonna happen". Notably, none of them says anything about why Lovato had to work as a judge on *X-factor* while going through recovery, or why she had to keep churning out albums when she was suffering.

This particular storytelling montage is thrilling for someone interested in Lovato's personal life, by telling viewers what it was "actually" like during those years they are invited into the symbolical backstage of her life. In giving fans access to this previously closed off part of Lovato's life, the documentary engages in the "performative practice" of an effective celebrity narrative (Marwick and boyd, 2011).

In many ways *Simply Complicated* is a complex and multifaceted portrayal of living with bipolar disorder, an addiction, and an eating disorder. Lovato reveals to her manager on camera that she had a relapse with her eating disorder related to the recent breakup with her boyfriend of many years. This together with the conversations about how hard it was for her to get sober, paints a picture of recovery and living with mental illness as an ongoing work in progress, something one has to keep working at for the rest

of one's life. This follows the logic of much mental health and addiction advocacy, but it also fits very well into the project of neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity, where the subject has to continually work on herself to constantly better herself (du Gay, 1996; Gill, 2007; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). And for all of Lovato's and her team's honesty about her struggles, what is left glaringly untouched is why she had to keep working while she was in such a vulnerable place. Following the logic of postfeminism and neoliberalism, the documentary seems to suggest that it is ok to struggle with things like addiction, eating disorders and mental illness, as long as you keep working against these difficulties and keep producing new things/adding to the labor market. The logic at work in Lovato's treatment program also reflects Scharff (2016) and Gill's (2017) observations about the "psychic life" of neoliberalism and postfeminism, where you have to work at bettering not only your career or physical body but also your affects.

The same levels of narrativization found in the previous documentary, *Stay Strong*, are present in *Simply Complicated*. There is "a narrative of private struggle, which authenticates her crisis" (Franssen, 2020, p. 96). Interestingly, most of the private struggles presented in the later film invalidates the authenticity and "realness" of what was presented in the earlier one. This is most starkly exemplified in Lovato's opening statement in the second film about using cocaine while filming the first one. But this is not presented as something that invalidates the truth and authenticity conveyed by Lovato, rather it serves to reinforce her realness in portraying her as extraordinarily bold in her current honesty.

Also folded into the narrative of the singer's private struggle in the second film is the pressure under which she was under while working for Disney, touring, and recording

an album all at the same time. The fact that Lovato was bullied in school is also

mentioned as cause of her troubles, as is the dysfunctional relationship to her biological

father, who is described as an "addict and alcoholic". But it is the revelation of her

bipolar diagnosis that ties it all together, working here as it did in the first documentary to

reify and externalize the cause of her issues (Franssen, 2020, p. 96). At about 20 minutes

into the film, just after having recounted the violent incident while on tour in Columbia,

another member of Lovato's team, John Taylor, says "that was when it dawned on me

that this was probably a much bigger situation than just a kid who wanted to party". The

"much bigger situation" is implied to be the bipolar diagnosis, which Lovato's manager

recounts her getting in the following scene. Next, the singer herself explains it as follows:

> "When I got diagnosed with bipolar disorder, it just made sense. When I was
> younger I didn't know why I would stay up so late writing and playing music.
> And then I learned about episodes of mania and I realized that that's probably
> what it was - I was manic. In a way I knew that it wasn't my fault anymore.
> Something was actually off with me."

Here a connection is made between the bipolar diagnosis and Lovato's creativity, which

reflects the reverence in American culture for mania that Emily Martin (2009) identified

in her comprehensive study of bipolar disorder in the US. This is echoed in Franssen's

(2020) analysis of Lovato's celebrity health narrative, in which he identifies the bipolar

diagnosis specifically as fitting "within a broader, distinctly gendered 'spectacularization'

(Projansky, 2014) of female breakdown and ongoing self-improvement" (p. 92).

Lovato's description of the diagnosis as relieving her of fault echoes Eva Illouz's

(2007) analysis of therapeutic narratives, which she argues makes the individual

responsible for her psychic wellbeing, but does so by "removing any notion of moral

fault" (p. 55). Illouz contends that this kind of narrative "enables one to mobilize the

cultural schemes and values of moral individualism, of change and self-improvement",

but by "transposing these to childhood and to deficient families, one is exonerated from

the weight of being at fault for living an unsatisfactory life" (Illouz, 2007, p. 55). We see

that in the case of Lovato with her alcoholic father and the bullying from classmates, but

also with the bipolar diagnosis. This suggests that in therapeutic narratives of the late

2010s, a mental illness diagnosis weighs just as much, if not more, than the dysfunctional

family dynamics of the Freudian-dominated narratives of the 20ᵗʰ century. By adding a

medical diagnosis to the mix, Lovato is one step further removed from being at fault for

her troubles than if it was "just" her dysfunctional father and bullying. But nevertheless,

Lovato's condition is still something that needs to be continually managed, which is

shown in the "recovery montage" towards the end of the film. It is also in this montage

that the narrative of self-improvement and self-transformation that "recalibrates her

celebrity image" (Franssen, 2020, p. 96) is found. This part of *Simply Complicated* is

similar to the earlier documentary, but in this version it is amped up, with physical

exercise taking center stage as a particular savior.

As the camera pans over a Los Angeles road lined with palm trees, Lovato's voice

says "Everybody has their own path and recovery. For me it's about going to therapy,

working my program, and having an honest relationship with myself and the other people

around me." As the singer is shown working out, sparring with professional boxers and

then practicing Jiu-Jitsu, her voice over says "The gym really helps, and I know I would

be in a very dark place without it." Then we see a montage of very well-lit shots of

Lovato exercising to upbeat music as she says "I'm on a journey to discover what it's like

to be free of all demons" (see figure 5). During the gym sequence, Lovato's life coach

Bayer explains how he introduced the star to Jiu-Jitsu specifically because it involves a

"reward system that takes many many many years to get through", with the implied effect

that she will be busy advancing within this kind of exercise for a long time to come.

Exercise is a remedy commonly prescribed as part of mental illness treatment and it is not

surprising that it is part of the singer's recovery plan. But it is remarkable how well this

depiction of the role of exercise in Lovato's life fits with the neoliberal and postfeminist

subject who never stops working on herself. Here the script about the benefits of working

out is slightly new in that it is not (only) about getting a desirable body, but about

keeping a distressed mind in check.

The last part of the documentary also expresses both a postfeminist and a popular

feminist ethos, showing Lovato and her friends discussing dating. At one point the singer

says "I'm on a dating app with both guys and girls. I am open to human connection

whether that's through a male or a female that doesn't matter to me." Next Lovato's

stylist helps her pick out a date outfit, which turns into a montage of the singer in sexy

poses as she says "When I'm comfortable in my own skin I feel confident and when I feel

confident I feel sexy and when I feel sexy, watch out" (see figure 6). After her friends are

shown talking about how fun "single Demi" is, Lovato says "There's like a certain stigma

around a woman having casual sex and for me I just feel like it's my body and it's my

choice and it's exciting and it's a connection with somebody and it's fun." This sequence

aligns Lovato with the popular feminism that Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) identifies as a

prevalent feature of contemporary media culture. The star is here positioned both as a

desirable sexual subject who is up for anything (a postfeminist trope) and by pointing out

the double standard for women having casual sex, she also politicizes her actions (albeit

in the most gentle ways) and aligns herself with "feminist expressions and politics [that] are brandable [and] commensurate with market logics" (Banet-Weiser, 2018b, p. 13). This is a kind of feminism "that focus[es] on the individual body … [and] that emphasize[s] individual attributes such as confidence, self-esteem, and competence as particularly useful to neoliberal self-reliance and capitalist success" (Banet-Weiser, 2018b, p. 13).

The notion of recovery as an ongoing process is different from the victim-to-victor narratives that Blackman (2007) describes, in which the journey to recovery starts by acknowledging the illness, followed by the adoption of a psychiatric treatment plan that ultimately cures the person afflicted so that they overcome the trouble once and for all. What we see in the case of Lovato is instead a dedication to always be working at getting and staying better. This is a common aspect of addiction recovery, where the subject, masculine or feminine, is told that their condition will never end but can be eternally managed. What Lovato's case shows, is how well this recovery narrative fits into the notion of the ideal postfeminist and neoliberal subject who constantly works on herself to improve herself at every turn. This is partly because she is recovering from not only substance use issues, but also an eating disorder and bipolar disorder, which opens up her health narrative for more than just "addicts" to identify with. Lovato's story celebrates and confirms a neoliberal ideology of meritocracy, where overcoming repeated crises and setback while remaining productive "even under the pressures of the media, the market and mental illness" positions her as "a shining example of the neoliberal, self-managing subject" (Franssen, 2020, p. 99). That she as a female celebrity is able to inhabit this position, where traditionally it has mostly been famous men who have been

able to reinvent themselves after scandal (as discussed above), becomes less exceptional when one takes into account the feminist media studies work on women as ideal neoliberal subjects (Gill, 2007, 2008; Scharff, 2016a; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). What Lovato's celebrity health narrative and the numerous confessions from female stars about their own mental health issues from 2015 and onwards seem to suggest, is that the ideal postfeminist and neoliberal subject who works on herself constantly to achieve success has some room for failure as long as it is successfully overcome. By combining the process of addiction recovery with mental illness recovery, Lovato's narrative indirectly challenges the victim-to-victor narrative and reconfigures the idea of being completely cured of mental illness into one of more continual maintenance.

The public acknowledgement of a relapse

That the process of recovery is never complete was seen for Lovato the year after *Simply Complicated* was released. On June 21, 2018 the singer released a single titled "Sober," which she introduced on Twitter as simply "My truth" (ddlovato, 2018). The lyrics seemed to suggest a relapse into substance use, with the chorus going "Mama, I'm so sorry I'm not sober anymore/ And daddy please forgive me for the drinks spilled on the floor/ To the ones who never left me, we've been down this road before/ I'm so sorry/ I'm not sober anymore" (Romano, 2018). A few days later it was reported that she was in a feud with life coach Bayer and that every photo and mention of her name had been wiped from the website of the CAST-center that he runs and which Lovato had previously been a co-owner of (Radar Staff, 2018). And on July 24, a little over a month

after the release of "Sober," Lovato was rushed to the hospital after an overdose that almost killed her. At first it was reported that heroin was involved, but this was quickly denied by Lovato's family and a later report indicated that it was an opioid-overdose involving Oxycodone laced with Fentanyl (TMZ, 2018; Wang, 2018a). About two weeks after the incident Lovato posted a note to her fans on Instagram, in which she said "I have always been transparent about my journey with addiction. What I've learned is that this illness is not something that disappears or fades with time. It is something I must continue to overcome and have not done yet" (Bailey, 2018). Here again is the notion of her addiction and mental illness as something that needs to be constantly worked at.

The release of "Sober" can on the one hand be read as an honest way of portraying the struggle of addiction and the very common experience of relapsing. But on the other hand it can be seen as a way of incorporating Lovato's struggles into her brand and literally profit off of them (Sober was certified Gold by The Recording Industry Association of America in August 2019 (RIAA.com)). Or a less cynical reading of the situation might be that the release of the single and the confession of her relapse was not, as might have been the case in other eras and with other artists, a taint on her brand but instead fit neatly into the larger "Lovato product" and almost functioned as confirmation of her authenticity.

Another thing to note in relation to Lovato's relapse is the outpouring of support from fans. A day after the report about her overdose, a fan account on Twitter started the hashtag #HowDemiHasHelpedMe, urging other fans to "share your stories and positive things so hopefully Demi sees positive things if she comes online" (Demi Lovato News, 2018). The hashtag was trending on Twitter as fans began posting their stories and it was

covered by several other media outlets (Amatulli, 2018; Newsbeat, 2018; Schuster, 2018). One notable example of a fan contribution was the following:

> "The night I attempted suicide Demi had a performance on tv. My dad was watching it and not me. I was upstairs in my room taking pills to overdose. I heard [Lovato's song] skyscraper from my room so I told my mom I took pills and checked into a hospital for 8 Days." (A., 2018)

Other fans have responded to this tweet with things like "You are so strong! I hope you are better now," "So glad that you are still here," and "I'm sending you a long tight hug. Thank you for sharing your story" (A., 2018). Like this the fans show support not just for Lovato, but also for each other.

The reciprocal acts by the fans in sharing how Lovato has helped them, might be a way to help each other through the public display of vulnerability on social media, something I discuss more in the following chapter. Because even if they purport to write to Lovato, the immediate audience is not the singer herself (the assumption on social media is that stars usually do not read everything that is said about them, exemplified in what an occasion it is for fans when they do get a response from their idol), but other fans. In this way the outpouring of support for the celebrity becomes in itself a forum for sharing experiences and making each other feel less alone.

Another example of the outpouring of support from Lovato's fans at the time was a group of fans gathering in Atlantic City on the night when the singer was supposed to perform but had canceled due to the overdose. A group of over 60 "Lovatics" (what her fans call themselves) gathered to sing her songs together to show their support for the singer (Blackmon, 2018). One fan wrote on Twitter about the gathering: "Omg the people in Atlantic City for the Demi tribute are in a circle talking about how Demi has helped them and some of them even started crying :(the bond we have over Demi is so special"

(Blackmon, 2018). Here Lovato's openness about her issues becomes a way for fans to share their own experiences with each other and get support.

Lastly it is also worth mentioning that Lovato made her first performance after the overdose at the 2020 Grammys, where she sang the new single "Anyone," a performance that was widely praised for its display of vulnerability (Kornhaber, 2020). A week later she sang the national anthem at the Super Bowl, in a firm establishment of a comeback (Specter, 2020). In this way it is clear that the cyclical nature of Lovato's bipolar disorder and the always present risk of relapse into substance use or eating disorder are not the dire threats to her life and career as they might have been in previous eras. Instead Lovato's struggles and her overcoming them serve to strengthen her brand as "pop's self-help princess" (Martins, 2015).

SELENA GOMEZ: Can-do girl turned mental health advocate

Like Lovato, Selena Gomez had her acting debut on the children's show *Barney & Friends*, where she appeared 2002-2004 from age 10 to 12. She then gained wider fame as the lead on the Disney channel show *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007–2012) and subsequently starred in a multitude of films, some aimed at the Disney audience and others being more controversial, like Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012) and Woody Allen's *A Rainy Day in New York* (2019). Beyond her acting work she has released three albums with her former band *Selena Gomez and the Scene: Kiss & Tell (2009), A Year Without Rain (2010),* and *When the Sun Goes Down (2011),* all of which attained gold certifications and reached the top ten in the US. She has also released three albums as a solo artist: *Stars Dance* (2013), *Revival* (2015), and *Rare* (2020), all of which

debuted at number one in the US (Caulfield, 2020). Additionally, she has executive

produced the Netflix drama show *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) and the documentary

series *Living Undocumented* (2019). According to a January 2020 article in the *London

Evening Star*, Gomez's net worth is $75 million (DeSantis, 2020). Gomez's brand is thus,

like Lovato's, a big enterprise involving a lot of money and employing a large number of

people.

As mentioned above, Gomez had an overall more wholesome persona than

Lovato, staying away from the kind of scandal that the latter singer was involved in (even

if Gomez was in an on-and-off relationship with fellow young artist Justin Bieber from

2010-2018 that led to a lot of speculations from fans and the media, those rumors were

primarily about the state of their partnership (Bailey, 2019; Wallace, 2018)). In 2013

Gomez canceled the end of a planned tour to "spend some time" on herself, and in early

2014 she checked in to an Arizona rehab facility (Martins, 2015). This led to tabloid

speculation about drug or alcohol abuse, but when she chose to speak about the events the

following year she revealed that she had been diagnosed with the autoimmune disease

lupus and had been receiving chemotherapy for it at the time (Martins, 2015). It was not

until in August 2016, also in relation to the cancelation of a planned tour, that she

revealed that she was suffering from anxiety and depression. In a statement to *People*

magazine she said that she had "discovered that anxiety, panic attacks and depression can

be side effects of lupus, which can present their own challenges." Adding, "I want to be

proactive and focus on maintaining my health and happiness and have decided that the

best way forward is to take some time off … I know I am not alone by sharing this, I

hope others will be encouraged to address their own issues" (Chiu, 2016). Here again the

logic is that if Gomez with her large audience speaks out, it will inspire others to seek help. Additionally, in the *People* magazine story about the break a "source close to Gomez" tells the outlet that it is "'absolutely not related to alcohol or substance abuse' and was prompted after she 'hadn't felt like herself' over the last couple of months" (Chiu, 2016). Here a clear demarcation is made against addiction issues, which indirectly serves to separate the anxiety and depression that Gomez was suffering from, from any assumption about misuse of alcohol or drugs. This can be read as Gomez's team trying to deny rumors about her abusing substances and make clear that she is not like one of the many other starlets whose troubles are the result of too much partying (like in the case of many of the "trainwrecks" mentioned above). Even if addiction issues are increasingly considered to be a disease that is out of the control of the person suffering them, there is still a level of irresponsibility attached to the notion of someone getting addicted, as it presumes an engagement with illicit drugs or excessive amounts of alcohol at some point. By coming out as suffering from anxiety and depression as a result of her lupus, Gomez's issues are indirectly defined as rooted in a biomedical paradigm beyond her control.

A few months after initially announcing that she was taking a break to focus on her mental health, Gomez appeared at the American Music Awards (AMAs) in November, 2016. In the acceptance speech for Best Female Artist in the Pop/Rock genre the singer addressed the break, saying "I had everything and I was absolutely broken inside. And I kept it all together enough to never let you down, but I kept too much together, to where I let myself down" (Mei, 2016b). She thanked her fans for their loyalty during this time and added "if you are broken, you do not have to stay broken" (Mei, 2016b). The speech at the AMAs was widely praised for its sincerity and honesty, with

many media outlets pointing out that Gomez held back the tears while delivering it, as well as how other celebrities in attendance at the awards show seemed to appreciate what she was saying (Avila, 2016; Rosa, 2016; Vogue.com, 2016).

After initially opening up about her mental health issues, Gomez repeatedly spoke out for mental illness awareness, prompting *Vogue* to describe her as "a compelling new voice for a generation of young women … [who is] breaking down conversational barriers surrounding emotional health" (Vogue.com, 2017) in March 2017. In this interview she mentions rehab, group therapy, and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) as elements that have helped her, revealing that she sees her therapist five times a week (Vogue.com, 2017).

In a cover story for the September 2017 issue of *InStyle* magazine, titled "Selena Gomez Is Grown Up, in Love, and Taking Control of Her Mental Health," the journalist describes Gomez as having "a particularly potent power: Her celebrity comes not just from what she creates, how she looks, and whom she dates but from how she has suffered and how she has picked herself up" (Brown, 2017). In the interview accompanying the piece Gomez talks about her 90-day stay in a treatment center the previous year, how insecurity is something she works on in therapy, and how she is learning to stand up for herself. Here, just like in Lovato's health narrative, Gomez is portrayed as having successfully overcome, or rather as successfully managing, her mental health issues. The journalist's description of this experience as giving her "a particularly potent power" marks Gomez's suffering as something that adds to her celebrity and star power. That she has been to rehab is not a negative point on her resume, on the other hand it seems to be a

valuable experience that gives Gomez a maturity and frankness that only adds to the authenticity of her brand.

Just like with Lovato, Gomez's struggles were recurring. Later in 2017, it was revealed that she had a kidney transplant from a close friend and subsequently "laid low" for a while, not promoting her work or posting on social media. Then in January 2018 she checked into a "two-week wellness" program to regroup as a preventative measure for her mental health (Willis and Drysdale, 2018). A few months later, she said in an interview in *Harper's Bazaar* that her struggle with depression and anxiety is "not something I feel I'll ever overcome" adding that "it's a battle I'm gonna have to face for the rest of my life, and I'm okay with that because I know that I'm choosing myself over anything else" (Langford, 2018). Here she reflects the notion of mental illness recovery as a constant struggle, as displayed also in Lovato's health narrative. Additionally, the phrase "choosing myself over anything else" fits well into a hyper-individualized neoliberal and postfeminist culture that positions the self as something to work on and prioritize at all costs.

The state of Gomez's mental health became a widely discussed topic again in the fall of 2018, first when she announced that she would be taking a social media break (at the time she was the most followed person on Instagram) and a few months later when she was reportedly hospitalized twice in two weeks with issues related to the kidney transplant (Wang, 2018b;Willis and Drysdale, 2018). These hospitalizations caused her to have an "emotional breakdown" which led to her checking into a mental health facility to receive DBT (Bonner, 2018). This breakdown was not portrayed, as it might have been in other eras, as a sign of "failure, inherent instability or a lack of resilience" (Franssen,

2020, p. 95), but instead it was incorporated into her health narrative of struggle and maintenance of mental health.

She then broke her silence in January of 2019 with a post on Instagram to reflect on the previous year, one "of self-reflection, challenges and growth" (Dodson, 2019). In September 2019 Gomez received an award for furthering "the public's understanding of psychiatric illness and mental health" from the McLean Hospital, known for its psychiatric expertise and associated with Harvard Medical School (Longman, 2019). In conjunction with accepting the award the singer also revealed that she herself had received treatment there for mental health issues, and in April 2020 she disclosed that while there she had received a bipolar diagnosis (Vivinetto, 2020).[8]

This latter revelation happened not in an interview with a magazine or even on her own social media channels, but on the Instagram live talk show Bright Minded, hosted by fellow former child actor and musician Miley Cyrus during the COVID-19 lockdown (Vivinetto, 2020). The news was widely reported in multiple media outlets (Bailey, 2020; CBBCNewsround, 2020; Scott, 2020; Vivinetto, 2020; Young, 2020a). When asked why she had decided to tell the world about her diagnosis in this format instead of in a traditional interview, Gomez said that she "liked the rawness of the show" and felt comfortable to share her diagnosis with Cyrus because of the casual atmosphere (Luu, 2020). This confirms the increased intimacy and ordinariness of contemporary celebrity and in their communication with fans.

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[8] Incidentally, this was the same hospital that Sylvia Plath stayed at in the 1950s and later chronicled in *The Bell Jar.* Other famous former patients include poet Anne Sexton and singer Marianne Faithfull (Conradt, 2013).

Gomez has not done any big tell-all documentaries, like Lovato has. Instead the communication around her mental health happens in interviews, through her (and her peer's) social media channels, and indirectly in her work as an artist, which broaches mental illness and sadness in general.

Gomez is an executive producer of the Netflix show *13 Reasons Why* (2017-present), which follows a high school in the aftermath of a student's suicide (and that was subject to heavy coverage by *Teen Vogue*). As mentioned in chapter two, the show became immensely popular with its target demographic but received harsh critique from suicide prevention organizations, teachers, and parents, who argued that it glorifies suicide and simplifies complex mental health issues (Saint Louis, 2017). The fact that Gomez has produced a television show that goes against the message of traditional mental illness awareness and suicide prevention organizations casts an interesting light on her advocacy for mental illness sufferers.

Additionally, in the Spotify music video for her May 2017 single "Bad Liar" Gomez portrays what can be called a "sad aesthetic" (Alderton, 2018). The photo promoting the single shows Gomez lying down on a disheveled bed, staring at the viewer with a look full of sadness and hopelessness (see figure 7). Her hands are held together by a white silk rope, on one wrist she is wearing a yellow hospital bracelet spelling out the word "risk," and further up on the same arm a band aid. Fans started speculating in the comments section on Gomez' Instagram about whether the bracelet and the band aid were supposed to symbolize a suicide attempt. The photographer Petra Collins clarified (also on Instagram) that it had nothing to do with suicide, but that Gomez had come straight from a lupus-related hospital visit to the photo shoot (Carlin, 2017). Even if this

is the real story behind the photograph, leaving the bracelet and the band aid on results in an image that connotes self-harm and suicide for most people who do not know the back story. Interestingly, the above video is (at the time of writing in July 2020) no longer available on Spotify and on Gomez' YouTube channel another, much lighter, video is listed as the official one for the song. The second, official version, takes place in a 1970s high school setting where Gomez plays several different characters in a family drama with unclear outcomes. An audio-only video of "Bad Liar" that has the still image from the above described video as its background is still available, but the full moving image film is nowhere to be found on the star's YouTube or Spotify sites. This seems to be mostly due to the fact that the video with Spotify was an exclusive collaboration with that platform, but nevertheless it is notable that the more melancholic and self-destructive aspects of the first video are completely absent in the official one that remains available on the singer's channels (Plaugic, 2017).

Playing with this self-harming aesthetic positions Gomez somewhat off-center of the "victim to victor" narrative and the idea of overcoming struggles through perseverance displayed in much of Lovato's celebrity health narrative. In interviews, she acknowledges that things like rehab and therapy have helped her, but then she nearly glorifies feeling bad in her work as an artist and TV producer. Here she is flirting with the "sad girl" aesthetic (Alderton, 2018) embraced by self-identified sad girls on sites like Tumblr and Instagram, which I will address further in the following chapter.

Postfeminist sadness

I want to mention artist Lana del Rey here as a means of understanding the trends that circulated on the music scene during the time period that this project examines. The style of del Rey's music and visual representations is similar to the sad aesthetic that Gomez is experimenting with in some of her work. Del Rey, however, has not spoken about specific diagnoses like Lovato and Gomez, and she is absent from the compilation lists of celebrities speaking about mental illness. What she has spoken about is a period of heavy drinking in her early teens that led to her being sent to boarding school at age 14 and then getting sober at 18 (Heaf, 2012). Instead of saying that she suffers from depression, anxiety or any other established diagnosis, the singer has said that she thinks "ceaselessly of death" (Cassan, 2014) and that she has dealt with panic attacks but only attended therapy three times because she is "really most comfortable sitting in that chair in the studio, writing or singing" (Wagner, 2015). And most notoriously, she said "I wish I was dead already" while citing Amy Winehouse and Kurt Cobain as her heroes, both of whom died at the age of 27 (Jonze, 2014). Del Rey's official statements put her more in the role of having created a persona of being sad, rather than adopting the language of mental health advocacy in the way that Lovato and Gomez have.

Del Rey sings about female weakness and dependence in a way that makes it seem like she is enjoying it. These themes are present in much of her work (her first record having the apt title "Born to Die"), but is especially visible on her 2014 album "Ultraviolence" which is dominated by themes of submission and self-destructiveness in relation to various men. One line that particularly seems to encourage the abusive relationships portrayed throughout the album is a quote from a 1962 Carol King and

Gerry Goffin song: "he hit me and it felt like a kiss," sung on the title track "Ultraviolence." The persona del Rey communicates on this record is one that takes melancholic pleasure in not getting what she wants and sometimes hints at deriving pleasure from abuse.

As discussed in the introduction, del Rey's 2011 debut provoked many by portraying a woman who did not know what she wanted in a popular music landscape filled of women brimming over with confidence and determination (Schrodt, 2012; Vigier, 2012). When she released "Ultraviolence" in 2014 she was critiqued as outright anti-feminist on the grounds of glorifying female weakness and dependency (Shugerman, 2014). This was also around the same time as pop stars like Beyonce and Taylor Swift embraced a popular feminism that encourages female strength and independence. Del Rey's message of female weakness and dependence seemed to go directly counter to the strength advocated by popular feminism at the time.

In contrast, when Gomez spoke about her choice to be open about her depression and anxiety three years later, in 2017, she told *Vogue*: "We girls, we're taught to be almost too resilient, to be strong and sexy and cool and laid-back … We also need to feel allowed to fall apart" (Vogue.com, 2017). Here she speaks the language of (post)feminist empowerment, but instead of empowering women to be strong she wants to empower them to feel vulnerable. Something changed during the time between del Rey's emergence on the music scene and Gomez's call for girls to be vulnerable.

Scholars like Catherine Vigier (2012) noted already in 2012, when del Rey was a highly contested artist, that she gave "expression to some of the profound dissatisfactions that women continue to feel" (p. 3) despite having "followed mainstream society's

prescriptions for success in what has been called a post-feminist world, but who find that real liberation and genuine satisfaction elude them" (p. 1). During this time other celebrities expressed similar sentiments and were similarly contested. For example, Lena Dunham's show *Girls* premiered in 2012 and became the focus of many contested debates about whether or not the dysfunctional and dissatisfied characters she brought to the screen were feminist or not. Zoe Alderton (2018) makes an analysis of del Rey in relation to the critique of her as non-feminist, noting that she "represents narratives of female weakness, sadness, and failure" and "speaks to a generation who feel cut out of their forebears' market economy" (p. 100). Alderton specifically states that the acknowledgement of weakness should not be something that hurts the feminist cause:

> "Admitting that we are depressed or hurt should not make us less of a feminist. Natural human desires for those who hurt us, or for ill-conceived romances, should not make us feel as though we have betrayed our gender or let down the feminist cause" (2018, p. 100)

The sentiment Gomez expresses in her call for girls to be allowed to fall apart is the same as Alderton expresses here in relation to feminism. Even if Gomez does not name feminism directly, the reference to girls being asked to be "resilient … strong and sexy and cool and laid-back" (Vogue.com, 2017) reflects the demands of a popular feminism "that focus[es] on the individual body … [and] that emphasize[s] individual attributes such as confidence, self-esteem, and competence as particularly useful to neoliberal self-reliance and capitalist success" (Banet-Weiser, 2018b, p. 13). Both del Rey and Gomez, then, seem to respond to a media culture that demands overt positivity and confidence of young women.

Rather than suggest that either of them was the singular catalyst for more sadness in popular culture, I understand them both as giving expression to sentiments circulating

in the shared culture and their success in delivering a certain message being dependent on the yearning of audiences to hear about those issues. These themes will be further explored in the next chapter, where I examine the figure of the sad girl, that in some iterations is closely tied to del Rey.

A 2019 analysis of del Rey's impact on music in conjunction with the release of her album *Norman Fucking Rockwell* credited the singer with making mainstream music more sad (Horner, 2019). This is based not only on the writer's own observations (as is common in music journalism) but also on a 2018 study from researchers at the University of California at Irvine, which analyzed 500,000 popular songs released in the UK between 1985 to 2015 and classified them according to mood (Interiano, Kazemi, Wang, Yang, Yu, and Komarova, 2018). According to this research, there was "a clear downward trend in 'happiness' and 'brightness', as well as a slight upward trend in 'sadness'" (Interiano et al, 2018, p. 1), indicating that mainstream music has become statistically sadder. This shift has only become more felt since then, with the artist Billie Eilish taking the world by storm with her sad and melancholic sound, winning five Grammys at the 2020 awards ceremony and composing the theme song for the latest Bond film (Messman, 2020; Nicholson, 2020).

In the above mentioned analysis of del Rey's impact on music, Al Horner (2019) traces the roots of del Rey's sound to the niche music genre of "torch songs," defined as "a form of pop that is traditionally by and about downtrodden women who suffer at the hands of emotionally abusive men, but continue to love them devotionally anyways." So while del Rey definitely did not invent this sad genre of music, she was instrumental in bringing it into the contemporary mainstream and use it to express "a very 21st-century

sadness" (Horner, 2019). Horner (2019) also connects the shift towards a sad sound with the changed conversations around mental health and illness, stating that "in 2019, there's infinitely more room for discussions about depression in chart music than 10 years ago, mirroring wider social trends." So even if Horner ascribes del Rey a lot of agency in making this happen, I do not necessarily think it was only del Rey who was driving this change, but rather that she was part of a wider social shift towards more sadness in popular culture, that came as a response to an overtly upbeat and empowerment focused feminine media culture.

The "sad aesthetic" displayed in the work of artists like Del Rey and Gomez, combined with the multiple celebrities speaking out about their mental health issues, reveal a complex media ecology. A star like Gomez can announce that she wants to empower women to feel allowed to fail while simultaneously creating art that flirts with romantic notions of suicide and psychic suffering.

On the one hand, Gomez speaking out about her issues and encouraging people to seek help can be considered as part of the postfeminist confidence trope. Encouraging women to "feel allowed to fall apart" can be another way of "empowering" them to take responsibility for their own lives. Even more so if the help one is encouraged to seek is to turn to the traditional psychiatric system, following the victim to victor narrative and understanding one's sadness as caused entirely by neurological components. This approach does require a reaching out for help, but not in a messy, (directly) interpersonal way. The trust in the psychiatric system maintains mental illness as something singular to be taken care of just as a "traditional" physical disease. If the subject takes care of her

issues through medical channels she can remain a "no-needs woman" in all other areas of her life.

On the other hand, the increased presence of sadness and the raised awareness of mental illness as something that affects a lot of people, can be seen as an acknowledgement of the impossibility of constant confidence and independence. Are Lovato, Gomez, Del Rey, and others signs that the self-disciplining of emotions, the need to be independent and strong is disappearing or loosening up? Is the makeup of the postfeminist and neoliberal subject changing so as to include (certain kinds of) vulnerability?

What is clear is that female celebrities suffering emotionally and sharing that with fans is not as much of a tarnish on their personal brands as such revelations once were. Instead an openness about mental health struggles can add to the authenticity of a celebrity brand, especially if the star herself is shown as working diligently to become better. In the case of Lovato and Gomez, the fact that they keep encountering obstacles and subsequently go into treatment, only makes them more authentic and relatable to their fans. The popularity of del Rey's persona and her sad music influenced and paved the way for the more straightforward sadness of a later artist like Billie Eilish.

CONCLUSION

Celebrities are an important part of the popular culture landscape and the ways they approach mental health function as models for how to think about such issues in culture at large. The shift from media speculation about what ailments a celebrity might suffer from (often in sensationalist ways) to a climate where stars themselves speak first-

hand about their experiences indicates a turn towards a more mental health aware, intimate, and relatable celebrity branding strategies.

The case of Demi Lovato shows how celebrity health narratives around mental illness have changed throughout the 2010s. Her first tell-all documentary from 2012 was focused largely on presenting a star who had overcome difficulties and emerged stronger on the other side (down to the title of the film being *Stay Strong*). Even if she showed some vulnerability the focus was on how she had emerged past difficulties, resembling the victim-to-victor narrative in which a diagnosis is made, treatment is had, and the subject is declared a winner over the disease. Her second tell-all documentary, released five years later, presents a more complicated picture of mental illness and recovery (and aptly titled *Simply Complicated*). The original illness narrative is questioned in the confession about Lovato being under the influence while filming the first documentary, and the viewer is subsequently presented with an individual who is flawed and constantly working on her issues, which appear as always in need of management. This suggests that the ideal neoliberal and postfeminist subject now has room for some failure and weakness, but these have to be worked at to be repeatedly overcome. Lovato's 2018 relapse, the profitable release of the single Sober, and the subsequent comeback in 2020 cements Lovato's narrative as one of successful self-transformation and reinvention. While the celebrities who managed to go through public breakdowns and come out stronger on the other side in previous eras tended to be male, Lovato's narrative suggest that this is no longer the case and that female stars can now also recast themselves as successful masters of their own lives by overcoming difficulties. The gendered aspect of the celebrity mental illness narrative is now not configured so as to invalidate female

celebrities who suffer, instead the female star who is depressed or anxious and successfully manages it fits well into the dominant "psychic life" of neoliberalism, postfeminism, and a market-friendly popular feminism.

This is emphasized in the case of Selena Gomez, who at the start of the decade was defined as a "super can-do girl" (Projansky, 2014, p. 75) who stayed far away from scandal, but then opened up about her experience of depression and anxiety in 2016. She has largely been cast as a mental health advocate and responsible role model, and her case shows the viability/marketability of mental health advocacy for a celebrity brand at that point in time.

At the same time she has played with a sad aesthetic in her work as an artist and television producer. Comparing how Gomez's work was received with Lana del Rey's debut in 2011-2012 revealed the shifting attitudes towards expressions of female sadness and weakness. The subsequent success of del Rey and the broader turn in popular culture towards more sad expressions suggest a dissatisfaction with overtly positive empowerment narratives and a yearning by audiences for representations of negative affects like sadness. Something I discuss further in the following chapter, which looks at the worlds of social media and how mental illness and sadness have been discussed there.

CHAPTER FOUR: Socially Mediated Sadness: Sad Girls and the Public Display of

Vulnerability

"If you've heard the term "Sad Girl" recently, it's probably in reference to Lana Del Rey, queen of pop melancholy who has inspired a million #PrettyWhenYouCry selfies. It could have been on Tumblr, too, where lately teen angst manifests as dip-dye braids and soft-focus bruises. Actually, when you think about it, Sad Girls are everywhere—in the musings of Twitter personality @SoSadToday, the selfies of artist Audrey Wollen, creator of "Sad Girl Theory," and on Etsy, where you can buy Sad Girl necklaces, pins, vests, and tote bags, typically in pastel."
(Hines, 2015)

The above quote is from a 2015 article titled "A taxonomy of the sad girl" in the fashion and style magazine *i-D*, and I include it here because it captures the multifaceted presence of the sad girl online at the time (this magazine also declared 2015 the year of the sad girl (Newell-Hanson, 2015)). Like many internet phenomena, the sad girl has taken many different forms and cannot be easily defined or narrowed down into one specific thing. This chapter turns to the worlds of social media platforms to understand how mental illness was spoken about in gendered ways online during 2008-2018 through this figure of the "sad girl," one most broadly defined as "a young woman who is unashamed of her emotional life and who fearlessly acts out her pain for others to see" (Alderton, 2018, p. xx).

Several writers in the smaller popular press (fashion/style magazines that cover internet culture) have written about how she appears on different platforms, describing the kind of posts shared and favored by the sad girls on Tumblr and Instagram (Devcollab, 2017; Joho, 2019; Mondalek, 2018; Petrarca, 2016; Saxelby, 2016) as well as covered specific prolific sad girls like artist Audrey Wollen (Barron, 2014; Tunnicliffe, 2015; Watson, 2015; Wells, 2016), writer Melissa Broder (@sosadtoday on Twitter)

(Montgomery, 2014; Vozick-Levinson, 2015) and the collective Sad Girls Club (Decaille, 2017; Fluker, 2018, Jacoby, 2017, Ross, 2017). Attention has also been given to the fashion trends of wearing your mental distress on your sleeve, so to speak, with hats declaring "being sad is ok," sweatshirts reading "emotional tendencies," and a brand called "Cry Baby" which has the tagline "i made this brand to show you that it's okay to cry" (Jennings, 2016; Pandika, 2019).

At the time of writing the scholarly study of the sad girl has been limited. Several journal articles have been written about the presence of content depicting non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) in online contexts, primarily from a health care perspective that looks at how Internet spaces encourage or discourage self-injury (Duggan, Heath, Lewis, and Baxter, 2012; Jadayel, Medlej, and Jadayel, 2017; Seko, Kidd, Wiljer and McKenzie, 2015; Whitlock, Powers, and Eckenrode, 2006). There have also been a few studies from a media studies perspective about specific online forums for mental health support like Ian Tucker and Lewis Goodings' (2018) examination of the UK based site *Elefriends* or Anthony McCosker's (2018) analysis of the Australian mental health organisation *beyondblue*, both of which point to the importance of social media and peer influencers in the treatment and recovery from mental illness. Among those who have focused specifically on the sad girl are Eileen Mary Holowka (2018), who has written about the way the sad girls of Instagram function as a community and a counter public, and Heather Mooney (2018) who has examined the racial aspects of the sad girl in comparison to another affective figure circulating online, the Carefree Black Girl.

It is important to note early on in the discussion of sad girls that even if this figure was at its most visible during 2014-2015, she originated in the Chicana/Latina culture of

1990s Los Angeles. One of the groups I look at in this chapter, Mexico-based Sad Girls Y Qué, explicitly traces the use of the term to this context and calls out other sad girls for ignoring these roots.

Zoe Alderton (2018), from whom I borrow the broad definition of the sad girl mentioned above, has done a meticulous job of studying the visual rhetoric of online self-harm communities and dedicates an entire chapter of her book *The Aesthetics of Self-Harm* to sad girls and "the internet and the performance of mood" (p. 95). Alderton notes that the #sadgirl tag on Tumblr contains images of self-harm and suicidal ideation but also involves "a high degree of self-awareness," noting that "while the sadness is genuine, performances are often overblown or ironic" (2018, p. 95). This distance and irony are key to understanding the sad girl phenomenon, and by taking these aspects into account one can move away from a simple "good" or "bad" value judgement about young people's practice of sharing dark feelings online, which is often the case in the scholarly pieces from researchers with roots in medical fields. Alderton's approach is more nuanced as she notes that:

> "The Sad Girl is core to a new brand of feminism and philosophy that defines the performance of mood online, revealing both *why* young women are so sad and *how* sadness can actually be a way of releasing negative affect and protesting wrongdoing rather than wallowing in non-action" (Alderton, 2018, p. 95, italicization in original)

I follow this approach in my examination of the sad girl phenomenon as I hope to be able to open up discussion towards questions about whether or not the sad girls are sharing a new kind of sadness, and if so, in what ways this might challenge traditional conceptions of sadness and mental illness. While the previous two chapters dealt with more conventional types of media and popular culture, this chapter turns to the world of

Internet peer to peer networks and smaller micro-celebrities to examine how mental health was talked about there.

This chapter also further opens up the connections between mental illness and sadness. In the previous chapter I traced the links between Selena Gomez's mental health advocacy, her use of sad aesthetics in her work, and Lana del Rey's embracement of a sad persona. In the analysis of sad girls on social media, the connection between sadness and mental health continues as I consider not only mentions of specific diagnoses but also general sad feelings like isolation, despair, abandonment issues, and general disaffectedness.

In what follows I discuss how the sad girl appeared on the social media platforms Tumblr and Instagram, and the specific cases of Audrey Wollen, Sad Girls Y Qué, Sad Girls Club, and My Therapist Says. These cases are all examples of various ways of sharing one's disaffected/negative feelings online, some explicitly adopting the label sad girl and others only writing about feeling bad. There is a spectrum of peer vs. hierarchical groups here, where some figurations see most users more or less equal to each other in terms of follower counts and others take the form of a few micro-celebrities posting to a large number of followers. This spectrum can be identified by platform. On Tumblr, users are fairly equalized due to the distributed forms of posting and reblogging (more on that below), whereas on Instagram the networks are structured more around a few influential users with large followings who obtain micro-celebrity status. Additionally, there are differences between the various micro-celebrities, where someone like Audrey Wollen inhabits an activist and art-oriented position compared to the more business-oriented profile of the account My Therapist Says. I discuss these differences and the critical and

acritical tendencies in the sad girl figure, as well as the themes of relatability, impasse, dynamics of coping, suffering and normalization's ambivalence. I explore how the Tumblr sad girls can be read as playing with the potential of impasse and resting in sadness by refusing to work immediately towards a cure, whereas their counterparts on Instagram are often explicitly political. I also consider the various levels of support found among the different versions of sad girls and how they navigate the display yet disavowal of injuries. Humor is a recurring aspect of the social media accounts I discuss here, both as a form of coping and a way to create community through "shared literacies" (Kanai, 2016). This chapter also argues that some of the sad girls are examples of the kind of "precarity-focused consciousness raising" proposed by the *Institute for Precarious Consciousness*.

The "feeling rules" of neoliberalism and the notion of relatability and are common threads in this chapter. Gill and Kanai (2018) point to the social "feeling rules" (after Hochschild, 1983/2003) of neoliberalism, of which the "confidence cult" and the relatable self are two integral parts of how women especially are urged to express their feelings. They argue that this joint imperative to confidence and relatability put women in a "double bind" in which they have to be "'relatable' but 'confident' in the appropriate proportions" (Gill and Kanai, 2018, p. 323). Throughout this chapter I look at how various manifestations of sad girls and other discussions of depression, anxiety, and "feeling bad" are expressed in relatable and not-so-relatable ways.

Affective resonance

Anna Gibbs (2013) uses the term "affective resonance" to designate how affects are spread and taken up among different individuals. She defines this as "the positive feedback loops created by affect, and in particular to the tendency of someone witnessing the display of affect in another person to resonate with and experience the same affect in response" (2013, pp. 131-132). In other words, when seeing someone else express a particular affect the chances are high that you will also adopt that affect. Among "sad girls" on the social media platforms I discuss in this chapter, the sharing of affective content by individual users resonates with other users and together form a mutual "sad girl affect," specific to each platform and sub-groups of users. Gibbs (2013) writes that "repeated experiences of affective resonance (whether 'firsthand' or 'mediated') produce a concatenation in which affect resonates with like affect, so as to link otherwise unrelated scenes without producing articulable meaning" (p. 133). The repetition of the sad girl affect in a recurring affective resonance creates a shared "sad girl aesthetic" whose meaning cannot be directly explained, but makes sense to the sad girls who participate in its creation and maintenance.

Taking it one step further, it can also be suggested that it is not just an affect and aesthetic that is being disseminated, but also a subjective figure of the sad girl. Jack Bratich has studied the memes generated around and out of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement to gain "insight into its mediated subjective processes" (2013, p. 2). He explains that "OWS started as a meme by meme specialists and then mutated into a meme-generator, flashmob, and platform" (p. 3). Bratich defines OWS as a potential aggregator of subjectivities, arguing that the movement "could be a name for an

aggregate of operations, even an emergent subjective figure" (p. 3). I think it can be helpful to think of the figure of the sad girl as constituting a similar "mediated subjective process." Through the sharing and reblogging of affective images the subject position of the sad girl emerges and becomes available for users to inhabit. Via meme-tic sharing of content, a shared experience of sadness is formed within the online communities of sad girls.

TUMBLR SAD GIRLS

Tumblr started in 2007 as a microblogging and social networking site (Alfonso, 2013). The site has established a reputation among the major social media sites as "a comfortable place to be honest, weird, and maybe even depressed" (Premack 2016) and scholars have identified it as particularly conducive for LGBTQIA+ communities and niche fandoms (Cho, 2018; Fink and Miller, 2014; Morimoto and Stein, 2018). It differs from other social media platforms in a few significant ways: it functions more like a blog than other social media sites, the content posted is published to each user's own Tumblr page which is visible also to non-users (the design of this page can be endlessly modified, something I elaborate on below). The social aspects of Tumblr resemble other platforms in a few ways: users follow each other via linear news feeds like that on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter; one can post original content in the form of text, image, quote, link, chat, audio, and video; and one can reblog or like someone else's posts. Much of the content that circulates among the sad girls has been reblogged thousands of times. This number is trackable in a "notes"-section found at the bottom of each post, each note representing one reblog or like. Study of the phenomenon of the sad girl on Tumblr

cannot include only an examination of a few users' original content, but needs to follow the content that is being spread in a meme-like fashion on the site.

Something to note in relation to all of the iterations of sad girls discussed in this chapter is the role of platform politics and technological affordances. Bryce Renninger points out in his study of counterpublics on Tumblr that "with changes in platforms and networks of users, media ideologies shift" (2014 p. 5). Such shifts contribute to the move of users from one platform to another, or the "spreading out" of activity across multiple platforms. The popularity of Tumblr has shifted since the beginning of the time period that I am examining.[9] At the time of writing Tumblr is still up and running, but many of the sad girl accounts that I follow are no longer active on the platform. Nevertheless, the Tumblr sad girl activity that I discuss here was a big part of the site during the time period of 2013-2017.

<u>Typical Tumblr sad girl content</u>

On Tumblr, some typical examples of content circulated by sad girls are pictures of pills in bright pink colors; animated texts that read things like "having a threesome with anxiety and depression;" glittering words that spell out "100% Sad" (see figure 8); and cartoon character Lisa Simpson lying face down on her bed with the word sad girl spelled out in the front and center of the image (Grvnge-nicotine 2015; Less-love-more-alcohol (n.d.); Animatedtext, 2016; Hollywood-noir 2015a).

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[9] In a 2018 study of the most popular social media platforms among college students Tumblr did not make the cut as one of the top sites, as not enough participants named it as their favorite platform (Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi and Gillespie-Lynch, 2018, p. 279).

Posts like these position sadness and depression as a shared and common experience. Statements like "having a threesome with anxiety and depression" do not portray anxiety and depression as by default negative ailments to be cured; neither does it position them as something to be ashamed of. Instead it states loud and clear that the person posting it is living with anxiety and depression, and has come to terms with it enough to formulate the suffering in a distanced way. One post about psychotropic drugs depicts pink pills in a polaroid-like frame with the word "Medicated" written at the bottom (see figure 9). Another is just a picture of a pile of turquoise pills with the imprint "S 90 3" (Havic-dp, 2014). A simple google search for this code reveals that the drug portrayed is the benzodiazepine Xanax. Posts like these both normalize and glorify psychopharmacology. There are also those that communicate the commonness of therapy, like a photograph of a framed poster that spells out "I told my therapist about you" (see figure 10).

The archive I draw on here is not a fixed or limited set of Tumblr accounts, but rather content I have seen circulated multiple times among the sad girls I follow on the site. I have been an observer of Tumblr since early 2010 and have tracked the emerging sad girl content on the site, which led me to follow the accounts that were most active in posting these kinds of things.

I have paid particular attention to the posts with a high number of notes, or reblogs. Due to its technological affordances like pseudonyms and modifiable HTML (Renninger 2014), Tumblr lends itself to a sad girl aesthetic (Alderton, 2018). The majority of these users do not use their real names, as is common practice on many other social media sites. This allows for a more open sharing of personal experiences and

feelings that people in their everyday lives might find alarming, "abnormal," or shameful. Several of the sad girls have also taken full advantage of the modifiable HTML, creating elaborately designed banners, including moving glitter backgrounds and gifs that reveal more information as you scroll over them (see http://grvnge-nicotine.tumblr.com and http://hollywood-noir.tumblr.com). For example, user Grvnge-nicotine has a header that shows a picture of Uma Thurman in Pulp Fiction smoking a cigarette, displayed on a background of crystals and pink pills. Surrounding, and on top of, this image are phrases like "I hate everything," "anti-you," and "you little shit" in various figurations and colors. In the top left corner of her site is a spinning pack of Marlboro cigarettes, which, if you hover over it, reveals informational blurbs under the headings "About me," "Quote of the moment," "Networks," and "Featured in" (see figure 11).

When one scrolls down the page, the posts made by grvnge-nicotine are seen in chronological order, with the newest on top. This is the way most sad girls design their Tumblr blogs, and it shows their posts lined up together in about five columns, creating a larger compositional image that conveys a shared sad girl aesthetic (Alderton, 2018) by displaying several of their posts together at the same time (see figure 12).

Suffering as ordinary

Blackman's notion of "reframing suffering as 'ordinary'" (2015 p. 26; see also Blackman 2001; Blackman & Walkerdine 2001) becomes relevant here. She explains that conceiving "suffering as 'ordinary'" reframes it as "not an exceptional phenomenon, but rather part and parcel of the costs of neo-liberalism(s)" (2015 p. 26). By conceptualizing suffering as ordinary, one can acknowledge the "difficulties of living normalised fictions

and fantasies of femininity that [are] produced within [neoliberalism(s)] ... as signs of personal failure, inadequacy and the associated economies of pain, fear, anxiety and distress that keep these apparatuses alive and in place" (2015 p. 26). Seeing suffering as ordinary, and not something that can immediately be cured or done away with, makes it possible to connect suffering with the neoliberal power structures that control our wellbeing while telling us that we have endless possibilities to maximize our mental and physical health. The sad girls on Tumblr do seem to see suffering as ordinary, as they rest in it as a part of everyday life that they cannot get away from. For example, a post by user straightboyfriend that has been reblogged and liked 42,304 times reads "its summer vacation you know what that means! Isolation & severe depression" (straightboyfriend 2016). Another post, by user gothicprep, which has been reblogged and liked 58,058 times, reads "how do i contour my abandonment issues?" (gothicprep 2016). Both posts imply a base level of constant sadness, and the ironic tone serves to establish shared connections with other users who have had similar experiences. The connection of sad feelings (isolation, severe depression, and abandonment issues) with usually joyful and "normal" things (summer vacation and makeup) turns the negative feelings into a shared comedic discourse.

Coping through humor

Within psychology, humor has long been acknowledged as a coping mechanism that can ease an individual's experiences of stressful events. Freud (1959, 1960) regarded it to be the highest form of defense mechanism, arguing that "the essence of humor is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and

overrides with a jest the possibility of such an emotional display" (1959, p. 216). Later

theorists have praised the humorist's ability for "rapid perceptual-cognitive switches in

frames of reference" (O'Connell, 1976, p. 327), which creates a distance that removes the

individual "from the immediate threat, of a problem situation, to view it from a different

perspective, and, therefore, to reduce the often paralyzing feelings of anxiety and

helplessness" (Martin and Lefcourt, 1983, p. 1314). Within this reasoning around humor,

the jokes shared by the Tumblr sad girls can be interpreted as signs that this online

discourse gives the individual users participating in it a relief from their immediate

problems and difficult feelings. Studies about how humor is being implemented by

various individuals have, however, somewhat complicated this notion of humor as a

coping mechanism. Rod A. Martin and Herbert M. Lefcourt (1983), for example, found

that humor does reduce the impact of stress, but for it to do so, "the individual must also

place a high value on humor and, more importantly, produce humor, particularly in the

stressful situations that he or she encounters in daily life" (p. 1322). More recently,

Martin and his students developed the Humor Styles Questionnaire to assess how

individuals use humor in their daily lives (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray and Weir,

2003), which has been used in hundreds of studies within the field of psychology since

(Greengross, 2019). The questionnaire gives individuals scores on four different styles of

humor: affiliative (use of humor to "enhance one's relationships with others"), self-

enhancing ("relatively benign uses of humor to enhance the self"), aggressive ("use of

humor to enhance the self at the expense of others"), and self-defeating ("use of humor to

enhance relationships at the expense of self") (Martin et al, 2003, p. 48). Scoring high on

the first two (positive) humor styles has been linked to positive health outcomes, such as

"being happier and having healthier relationships," whereas having high scores on the last two (negative) styles have been linked to negative effects on health (Greengross, 2019). A 2019 study using the questionnaire found that people diagnosed with depression used self-defeating humor more than non-depressed people, and that depressive individuals used the two positive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) less than non-depressive individuals (Kfrerer, Martin and Schermer, 2019). The relation between humor and wellbeing, then, is more nuanced than simply "humor eases suffering and stress", and self-defeating humor can in some cases be signs of worsening (or unchanged) mental illness issues. But the examples from the Tumblr sad girls mentioned above can also be read as examples of affiliative humor that enhances the relationships among the peers participating in the discussion, by joking about the conditions of living with depression and anxiety that they all share.

The use of humor in online contexts has been analyzed by feminist media studies scholars as a means of creating "shared literacies" (Kanai, 2016) in digital spaces, with feminist memes in particular being marked as tools to create "online spaces of consciousness raising and community building" (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015, p. 329; see also Lawrence and Ringrose, 2018). I will discuss the politically inflected community building aspects of feminist humor in online spaces more below, in relation to the sad girls on Instagram, for whom comedy and memes are a more central aspect of their online activities.

Impasse: Acedia and melancholia

Blackman (2015) and Cvetkovich (2012) have written about the "productive possibilities of negative states of being," which seek to "to de-pathologise shame, melancholy, failure, depression, anxieties and other forms of 'feeling bad,' to open up new ways of thinking about agency, change and transformation" (Blackman 2015, p. 25). Cvetkovich describes how the Public Feelings project uses the term impasse to refer to "a state of both stuckness and potential" (2012, p. 21). She explains that the notion of impasse maintains "a hopefulness about the possibility that slowing down or not moving forward might not be a sign of failure and might instead be worth exploring" (p. 21). Impasse could be one kind of productive possibility, allowing sufferers to rest in "bad" feelings without having to immediately work to get rid of them. Similar to Blackman's notion of suffering as ordinary (2015), the concept of impasse allows us to think about and process the power structures that inevitably affect the possibilities of succeeding at a healthy life. Among the sad girls on Tumblr, there is usually not an overt political engagement that directly connects suffering to structures of power. But the mere act of resting in sadness, as they do, might function as an impasse, where the refusal to move forward becomes a protest of the neoliberal demands of becoming a laboring and "happy" subject. Examples of this kind of resting in sadness include a glittering GIF that spells out "Self-destructive and unproductive" (Hollywood-Noir, 2016), a picture of a white t-shirt with the text "I've Been Crying All Day" accompanied by a red rose (Paintdeath, 2016), and a fake resume that includes items like "Battled Depression 2000-2013" (Fattyacidtrip, 2014). Posts like these presents a kind of opposite to the neoliberal feminism that urges women to "lean in" to competitive work environments, and can

instead be read as encouraging the reader to "lean in" to non-action, self-destructiveness, and sadness.

Two terms that can describe the kind of resting in sadness performed by the sad girls on Tumblr are acedia and melancholia. Acedia, first mentioned in early Christian writings on monastic life, refers to spiritual crisis, inertia, carelessness, and intense feelings of disgust and disdain (Cvetkovich 2012, p. 85). The term has generally been considered too religious to be used in understanding contemporary depression. But Cvetkovich (2012) argues that "acedia helps place the medical model of depression within the longer history of notions of not only health but embodiment of what it means to be human" (2012, p. 102). Thinking of depression as an "embodiment of what it means to be human" implies a rejection of a medical model that sees depression as something exceptional to be immediately cured away, and instead assigns it a central place in the experience of life itself. The tendency to conceive of depression as abnormal indirectly marks "feeling good" as the "normal" mood for which one should always aim.

Adopting a model of acedia that places depression as central to what it means to be human, allows a move away from seeing it as exceptional. Instead, it can be viewed as something that offers an opportunity to pause and break from the requirement to constantly be a profit-making subject, and provide a chance to process the emotional impacts of life under neoliberalism. In their refusal to heal, the sad girls can perhaps be an example of conceptualizing sadness as acedia.

Besides accepting sadness as ordinary, the sad girls on Tumblr can also be read as displaying an idealization of sadness. This could be described by the concept of melancholia, which has also been used as an alternative to contemporary medical models.

Cvetkovich (2012) explains that melancholia allows for "a return to a time when sadness could be viewed in other ways, including as a normative part of cultural experience, and even, most notably in the case of Renaissance and Romantic understandings that have had a persistent influence, as a creative force" (p. 107). It is something that touches more upon sadness in general, a sadness that is creative and inspiring, rather than the debilitating "stuck-ness" associated with depression.

There is also an element of pleasure in melancholia. Freudian psychoanalysis defines the melancholic as "one who incorporates a lost object of desire into her ego, so that she never fully experiences the loss, since the loved one, even in absence, becomes merged with the self" (Berlant 2012, p. 29). The lost love becomes integral to the make-up of the subject, to her entire self-image, and the incorporation of the loss takes the form of masochistic pleasure in love relationships. The pleasurable and creative aspect of melancholia differs significantly from the spiritual crisis and inertia of acedia. I think one can hold on to both concepts as ways of thinking through depression and sadness.

In relation to the sad girls on Tumblr, melancholia can capture the pleasure they derive in glorifying sadness, and acedia the inertia that co-exists with this romanticizing. Melancholia might be said to glorify feeling bad because of its promise to produce great art; it is the driving force of the archetypical tortured genius. In this way, the sad girls seem to partially adhere to a melancholic stance. There is a dedication to artists and celebrities that fulfill this role of tortured and misunderstood genius. Lana del Rey is the most frequently occurring figure in this context. The sad girls on Tumblr adopt her affect by posting and reblogging images of her, sometimes with lyrics from her songs written on them. She even has a song entitled "Sad Girl" that contains the lyrics "I'm a sad girl,

I'm a bad girl, I'm a bad girl." Another popular del Rey lyric that is repeatedly reblogged is "you like your girls insane," from the song "Born to Die," shared as text atop a photograph of the singer (m1nd--0ver--matter, n.d.). del Rey and the persona she inhabits (see discussion in the previous chapter) lends herself perfectly to the Tumblr sad girl aesthetic, shown by the frequency with which images of her and her songs are reblogged and spread among these Tumblr users.

Idealizations of real life persons who inhabit the position of (female) misinterpreted and tortured genius are also common. The trainwreck celebrities discussed in the previous chapter appear here as revered figures. Courtney Love, Amy Winehouse, Sky Ferreira, and celebrities who have had public breakdowns, like Britney Spears, Lindsey Lohan, and Amanda Bynes seem to reinforce a melancholic notion of sadness as romantic, mystical, and inspirational (see Got-you-where-i-want-you, 2017, infinitystorms, and cling2something, 2017). Acedia and melancholia are ways of conceptualizing sadness beyond the pro- or anti- medical model offered by psychiatry. I believe these concepts can explain the activity of the sad girls by providing ways of thinking about the simultaneous resting in, and normalizing of, sadness and the glorification of feeling bad.

A supportive community?

It is in the collective notions of sadness that develop among the sad girls on Tumblr, that the alternative conceptualizations of sadness move from theoretical to actual. By sharing their own views of sadness on this platform, it becomes possible for Tumblr sad girls to explore their feelings together, and potentially provide support for

one another by validating each other's experiences. The glorification of sadness found among the sad girls here sometimes borders on encouragement of self-destructive behavior. But, paradoxically, the fact that these experiences are shared within the virtual space intervenes in the glorified isolation and presents the possibility of a supportive collective. On Tumblr, in the middle of del Rey quotes and pictures of pills, more "positive" posts are found. For example, a gif of moving text that reads "sext: I want to be good for your mental health" (hollywood-noir, 2015b). "Sext" refers to the communication of sexual acts via text message, or, the text version of phone sex. "Sext:" followed by various sentences is a meme that juxtaposes the sexual connotations of "sexting" with non-sexual phrases for comedic effect. Saying "I want to be good for your mental health" in this context communicates a tender longing for emotional support and stability. This speaks to the complexities and nuances of the normalizing discourse happening here. On the one hand there is a risk of glorifying/getting stuck, but in the very act of sharing one learns that one is not alone and a kind of community is created.

AUDREY WOLLEN: Sad Girl Theory

One of the most highly publicized sad girls was the artist Audrey Wollen, who in 2014 gained widespread attention and media coverage with her "Sad Girl Theory." Wollen's artistic practice took place largely on Instagram, where she would post images of herself looking sad, often with smudged makeup in the middle of crying and tagging it #sadgirl (Holowka, 2018). There was also a series of photos recreating famous classical paintings but with details from modern girlhood, like a recreation of Diego Velázquez's 1651 painting *The Rokeby Venus*. In the original painting, Venus lies naked on a bed,

with her back to the viewer and looking at a reflection of herself in a mirror being held up by a kneeling cherub. In Wollen's version, the artist herself lies in the same position as Venus, naked and with her back turned to the viewer, staring at a laptop computer perched on a small table (Gonzalez and Wollen, 2018; Watson, 2015) (see figure 13). Wollen also posted multiple photos of herself posing in doctor's offices, undressed in examination rooms where she went to get treatment for her chronic illness (Wells, 2016). For Wollen this was not merely an expression of her own feelings and experiences, but a political act on a larger scale. She describes the theory behind it as follows:

> "Sad Girl Theory is the proposal that the sadness of girls should be witnessed and re-historicized as an act of resistance, of political protest. Basically, girls being sad has been categorized as this act of passivity, and therefore, discounted from the history of activism. I'm trying to open up the idea that protest doesn't have to be external to the body; it doesn't have to be a huge march in the streets, noise, violence, or rupture. There's a long history of girls who have used their own anguish, their own suffering, as tools for resistance and political agency. Girls' sadness isn't quiet, weak, shameful, or dumb: It is active, autonomous, and articulate. It's a way of fighting back." (Wollen in Tunnicliffe, 2015)

In this way Wollen directly politicized the sad girl and put her expression of suffering onto a larger scale. In interviews Wollen expressed discomfort with "the hyper-positive demands of contemporary feminism" that is fixated on self-love, approval and "making it cool and fun to be a girl" (Wollen in Barron, 2014). The problem with this, for Wollen, is that "it isn't really cool and fun to be a girl. It is an experience of brutal alienation and constant fear of violence" (Wollen in Barron, 2014). Here Wollen indirectly marks out the "feeling rules" of the contemporary moment for women and girls that Gill and Kanai (2018) write about in relation to neoliberalism and postfeminism, and of which the "confidence cult" (Gill and Orgad, 2015) is an integral part.

Wollen's work was widely covered in smaller popular press outlets and art magazines like *Dazed Digital*, *NYLON*, *i-D*, and *Artillery* magazine (Barron, 2014; Tunnicliffe, 2015; Watson, 2015, Wells, 2016), and from 2014 to early 2016 it seemed like she was everywhere on this part of the Internet. In the art magazine *Artillery*, Emily Wells (2016) pointed specifically to Wollen's claim of sadness as "an inherent threat to the status quo of oppression" which Wells saw Wollen doing by "challenging the hyper-positive, self-love-or-nothing feminism that permeates the Internet, and alienates feminists who are unable to subscribe to it." This commentary on Wollen's work might betray why she received so much attention, that is, because at the time, the feminism most visible in popular culture was one of empowerment and strength, and the notion that feminism could embrace a language of weakness seemed truly radical.

In interviews Wollen also mentioned singer Lana del Rey as an example of a sad girl (alongside historical figures like the writer Virginia Woolf and the saint St Catherine of Siena) and praised her performative displays of sadness (Barron, 2014). And as discussed in the introduction and in the celebrity chapter, del Rey can also be read as a response to an overtly positive feminism that does not leave any room for suffering. Alderton (2018) sees in del Rey someone who not only "represents narratives of female weakness, sadness, and failure" but also "speaks to a generation who feel cut out of their forebears' market economy" (p. 100). For Alderton, Wollen and del Rey are on the same continuum of sad girls that display sadness and weakness that represents women on a larger scale. I agree with this argument and the notion that the popularity of both del Rey and Wollen speaks to the frustrations of women at the time. These frustrations were first expressed among del Rey's fans and in the subcultural public online spaces that Wollen

inhabited, and later appeared also in a broader popular culture as seen by the increase in celebrity confessions and the turn to sadness in pop music, culminating in the rise of Billie Eilish in 2019 (as discussed in chapter three).

Wollen received largely positive media coverage and gained a following of 25,000 on Instagram, which put her in a kind of micro-celebrity position. But her role as an artist and feminist activist put her in a different position than the micro-celebrities usually associated with this platform, which tend to be "conventionally good-looking or people who display status symbols like luxury goods, due to the app's focus on visuals" (Marwick, 2015, p. 334). Wollen fits more into the category of subcultural or niche micro-celebrity, who have large amounts of followers but remain unknown to the larger public and are largely ignored by mainstream media (Marwick, 2015).

In early 2016 Wollen posted an image of her iPhone next to a white lily, the phone screen displaying a sad looking selfie of the artist herself. In a lengthy caption she announced that she had decided to take a hiatus from social media, explaining that she had become "increasingly unsettled and at times deeply hurt by the climate of online feminism" and her position within it (Wollen in Eler, 2016). She expressed discomfort specifically in relation to her political intentions and the ways they had been misconstrued on the platform:

> "… i worry my ideas are eclipsed by my identity as an "instagram girl" and i watch as ppl whose work i really respect write me off and ppl whose work i don't respect cite me as inspiration. "sad girl theory" is often understood at its most reductive, instead of as a proposal to open up more spacious discussions abt what activism could look like. my internet presence has been the best and worst thing in my life, and i owe it so much (so many friends! so much knowledge! so much solidarity and hope!!!) and i also find myself afraid of it, afraid of fucking up, afraid of being misunderstood, afraid of trusting ppl…" - (Wollen in Eler, 2016).

Wollen's doubts and her reasons for leaving Instagram speaks to the problems of cultivating activism on corporate platforms that value interaction in the form of likes and comments, which often reduces nuanced messages to bite-sized and easily digestible content. Wollen did not delete her account, however, instead it lay dormant up until February 2019, when she removed most of her old posts (including the ones about Sad Girl Theory) and tentatively started posting again (Jones, 2019).This speaks to the impermanence of social media platforms and how fickle internet phenomena can be. What remains available of Wollen's work is the writing about it by journalists and writers in other outlets.

Wollen's changed relationship to Instagram also speaks to the role of technological affordances of the social media platform being used. When I was trying to find out what had happened to Wollen and her work I found an article in *VICE*, titled "Remembering Instagram Before the Influencers" published in July 2019 (Jones). In it the writer mentions Wollen alongside other young artists who were popular on Instagram in the mid-2010s but who now have different relationships to the platform. One of them say about the early days of Instagram (which launched in 2010) that it "wasn't so censored … it felt more DIY and achievable. It wasn't so algorithm-heavy. I felt like it was more efficient. Whereas now, it feels like you have to invest money and do sponsored posts" (Jones, 2019). This refers partly to the change in the platform's algorithm, which went from showing users a chronological news feed of posts to one ordered by Instagram's secret mechanisms that privilege ads and sponsored posts. This is a reminder that users of corporate platforms like Tumblr and Instagram are always at the mercy of the corporate owners for whom profit-making is the ultimate incentive. Changes

to the platform affordances such as the algorithm of the news feed that determines how many of your followers will actually see your posts can affect both individual users' engagement and larger trends in who uses what platforms.

SAD GIRLS Y QUÉ: The (Presumed) Whiteness of the Sad Girl

Sad Girls Y Qué was another group that emerged online in 2014. Based out of Tijuana, Mexico, they described themselves as a "glittery, girl power gang" that used Internet art "to retaliate against the culture of machismo prevalent in Mexico and the world at large while reappropriating a girly 'feminine' aesthetic" (Calderón-Douglass, 2014; Eden, 2015). Run by five Chicana-identified women, the group mainly used a "Tumblr-style Facebook page" to curate images of "alternative icons like Selena, animated characters like Sailor Moon, and sex-positive imagery" as well as post "heartbreak poems and notes on depression and solitude" (Calderón-Douglass, 2014).[10]

For Sad Girls Y Qué the figure of the sad girl comes from the chola culture represented in the 1993 film *Mi Vida Loca*, which takes place in Los Angeles' (at the time Latinx-dominated) neighborhood Echo Park. In this context the sad girl comes from LA tattoo art where she is seen as "a gangster chick with tears running down her face" (Calderón-Douglass, 2014). Importantly "this image of a crying woman is not a weak victim. She's tough and conveys a more complex range of femininity" (Calderón-Douglass, 2014). An early definition of the sad girl on the site Urban Dictionary, which crowdsources definitions of emerging vernacular, confirms this origin of the figure: "A

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[10] The group also had a Twitter account, and at the time of writing both this and the Facebook page are still available, but they have not been active since April 2016.

nickname that is Chicana/Latina in origin, Sad Girl usually refers to a tough girl who has suffered extreme hardships" (Urban Dictionary, 2006).

In an interview with *VICE* magazine Anna Bon, one of the members, defines the sad girl as "any girl who is fed up with society's standards and patriarchy" but specifies that the figure comes from Chicana culture. Bon's definition of the sad girl here is different than the broader one laid out by Alderton, which I cite in the beginning of this chapter. This exemplifies the differences within the figure and the fluidity of the concept, showing how the same term may mean different things to different groups. For Bon and Sad Girls Y Qué, ignoring the Latinx origins of the sad girl amounts to a whitewashing of the concept. In the interview with *VICE* Bon indirectly calls out Wollen (who went to California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts, at the time), saying "There's this group of artists in LA who call themselves 'sad girls' and they're all white girls from CalArts. It's cool that the sad girl term is a trend and a thing, but the appropriation of it is annoying and offensive" (Calderón-Douglass, 2014). This speaks not only to Wollen and her sad girl theory, but also to the stereotypical sad girl as someone who has relied primarily on "white bodies as a way of presenting depressive themes and exploring girlhood" (Alderton, 2018, p. 106). In her analysis of sad girls and the figure of the Black Carefree Girl, Mooney (2018) notes that the sad girl sometimes uses aesthetics from Latina/x culture in ways that constitute cultural appropriation (p. 184). She points to Lana del Rey's 2013 video Tropico, a short film in which the singer wears clothes reminiscent of the Virgin Mary and works as a stripper in Los Angeles as an example. Mooney (2018) notes that del Rey is repeatedly shown "inhaling the smoke exhaled by her Latina/x consort … [she] 'breathes in' racialized space and embodied 'authenticity,' animating her

position as a 'real' Sad Girl. The narrative and surroundings are presented as objects,

consumable by Del Rey and her viewers" (p. 184).

For Mooney the sad girl manages to resist the "affective hegemony of white

girlhood" by showing the "failure of normative empowerment models" and the

"problems with can-do girlhood" (2018, pp. 184, 190). But the resistance expressed here

will always be limited by the fact that the sad girl is "a product of cultural appropriation

and neoliberalism, and the affective legacies of whiteness contour her emergence"

(Mooney, 2018, p. 190). It is important to note these differences and tensions in the sad

girl before too easily embracing her as a subversive alternative to an upbeat popular

feminism, as in Wollen's rendering of sadness as protest. Mooney's positioning of the

sad girl in relation to can-do girlhood is instructive when thinking about the racialized

aspects of the figure. Even if the can-do girl is not exclusively white, whiteness is an

important aspect of can-do girlhood and white images of sad girlhood risks positioning

only white girls as able to resist the demands of can-do-ness. Mooney's critique here also

suggests that the release that can be found in fully giving in to sadness/adopting a sad girl

position/identity, as Wollen's sad girl theory proposes, is mostly available to white

women and girls, as they are the ones that the empowerment discourse of can-do-ness

and popular feminism is aimed at. I believe one way of doing these tensions justice, is to

ask who gets to inhabit the position of unashamedly displaying their sadness online.

Among the sad girls on Tumblr, for example, when images of bodies appear they tend to

be white and thin, suggesting that inhabiting positions of acedia and melancholia are

mostly available to white girls and women. The work of the Sad Girls Club on Instagram,

which I will discuss further below, directly addresses this issue by focusing specifically on women of color suffering from mental illness.

<u>INSTAGRAM SAD GIRLS</u>

Wollen was not the last sad girl on Instagram, however, and from 2016 and onwards a group of users on the platform gained large followings through posting about their mental distress in humorous ways. The design and affordances of Instagram are more static than Tumblr, with all users of the platform having a fixed profile that always displays the number of followers that a particular user has. This makes the activity on the site more centralized than on Tumblr, with a few users emerging as the most influential in terms of how many followers they display on their profile and, up until recently, how many likes their individual posts get.[11]

Studying the sad girls of Instagram thus becomes a look at the most popular accounts and the kind of content they share, in contrast to the sad girls of Tumblr among which posts are shared and spread multiple times in larger numbers. Although Instagram users do repost each other at times, this practice is not at all as widespread as the reblogging on Tumblr, where content is spread faster than on Instagram.

Among the sad girls on Instagram, the most popular accounts were generally focused on making fun of mental distress through memes and other comedic portrayals.

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[11] In 2019 Instagram started experimenting with removing the total number of likes from a post, first in Canada, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand, and from November for users in the United States as well, something that is still in place at the time of writing in July 2020 (Leventhal, 2019). Even though users can no longer see the total number of likes on someone else's posts, a difference remains between regular users and those with large followings as the number of hidden likes can be described as "liked by [random username] and others" or "liked by [random username] and thousands of others." And likes are still visible when you view posts in a web browser, at least when one is located in Sweden as I am at the time of writing.

Astrology, leftist politics, and the disappointment of heterosexual men were also popular topics (Amato, 2017a; Hava, 2018a; prozac.barbie, 2017). The users who gained the most followers obtained a sort of micro celebrity status, but as discussed above in relation to Wollen, the content for which they are known puts them more in the position of subcultural or niche micro-celebrity compared to the conventionally good-looking and luxury-focused micro celebrities usually associated with Instagram (Marwick, 2015). Some of the most popular users tried to turn their following into financially profitable endeavors, but the leftist/anti-capitalist politics of these users made their economic aspirations more about supporting themselves and being able to make a living than directly selling products to their followers in the vein that social media influencers tend to do.

One such user posts under the handle @binchcity, but also displays her real name, Julia Hava, on her profile. She had 49, 100 followers in late 2018 and at the time of writing in July 2020 she had 119,000 followers. In the bio-section of Hava's Instagram profile there is a link to her personal website (binchcity.com) where one can purchase her memes as posters, t-shirts, stickers, or mugs. Hava also has a Patreon site, where one can support her work monthly (www.patreon.com/binchcity). Patreon is a platform which allows content creators to set up multitiered subscription programs for their fans, where followers pay a fixed amount each month to get access to premium content and support the work of the creator. This form of financing has become very popular among digital creators, with several creative workers living off their Patreon subscriptions (Robertson, 2017). For the sad girls on Instagram, to have a Patreon as well as selling merchandise, like Hava does, becomes a way to turn the large followings they have into actual financial

rewards, without going through the sponsorship deals that are common among more mainstream influencers. But it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that their followers do contribute in any large numbers or at all, when they can get most of the content for free on Instagram.

Hava's memes often take the shape of commercial illustrations that look like they might be from the 1950s or 1960s overlaid with her own comedic words. One example is an image of a woman in a flowing dress holding a medication bottle (that looks like it has been photoshopped in to her hand) next to the words "Girls just wanna have SEROTONIN." (Hava, 2018b) (see figure 14). Hava has captioned the image "remember to smash your mf [motherfucking] medication today everyone" and at the time of writing it has 19,943 likes and 475 comments. In relation to Blackman's (2015) notion of suffering as ordinary, posts like these serve the same function as the above mentioned examples from Tumblr that connects summer vacation with isolation and severe depression. In the case of Hava's Instagram posts, what is implied is not (only) a base level of constant sadness but that her followers are all taking some kind of prescription drug for depression. The phrase "Girls just wanna have SEROTONIN" is a play on several things: the 1983 hit song by Cyndi Lauper, the 1985 romantic comedy film, and the more recent signage "Girls just wanna have fundamental rights," part of popular feminist branding and available for purchase on t-shirt, mugs, stickers, and posters on sites like Etsy. The neurotransmitter serotonin is widely known to be associated with happiness and mood, with the most common class of antidepressants in most countries being selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) which (in simplified terms) help the brain to absorb more serotonin (Young, 2007). By inserting serotonin into the well-

known phrase and urging her followers to take their medications in the caption of the image, Hava normalizes the consumption of psychiatric drugs and makes it part of everyday life.

Another example from Hava is a short video of her "medication haul," where she humorously shows off her medication holder and the various antidepressants she is taking, in the style of the "makeup hauls" beauty vloggers frequently engage in. A "makeup haul" usually involves a show-and-tell of new beauty products (Pai, 2016) and in this video Hava addresses her viewers as lovelies before showing off two different dosages of the antidepressant Wellbutrin, one in a "beautiful eggshell color" and the other in "beautiful blue, I would say kinda baby blue and it matches the medication holder, so perfect coordination" (Hava, 2017). By employing the language of beauty bloggers while describing her psychiatric medications, Hava manages to create humor and irony around both "makeup hauls" and antidepressants. Taking antidepressants and other psychotropic drugs becomes as normal and ordinary as wearing makeup every day.

What happens here is similar to the normalizing discourse among the Tumblr sad girls, but as opposed to glorifying mental illness and suffering in a melancholic way, what Hava does is to joke about her mental health in a way that can be interpreted as crass and self-defeating (within the humor styles mentioned above (Martin et al, 2003)). Here again is an example of normalization's ambivalence. Presenting psychiatric drugs as normal and ordinary does not necessarily challenge any systems or question definitions of what it means to be mentally ill or healthy. In a way the distanced approach to her own struggles taken by Hava can be read as similar to *Cosmopolitan's* tongue-in-cheek

writing about mental health and as a clear example of the relatability Kanai describes in women's media culture and that involves a display yet disavowal of injury.

Within this framework, Hava and the other Instagram sad girls who post similar content may be deemed to make light of serious health issues by turning them into self-defeating comedy. But seen instead in a context where psychiatric diagnoses are something to be ashamed of, the open display of one's diagnoses and medications becomes an act of defiance against normative discourses. The humor employed here can then be read more as "affiliative" (Martin et al, 2003) in the sense that it is shared in a social media network with the purpose of connecting to others who have similar experiences of living with mental illness. The use of humor here may be read as diminishing the seriousness of mental illness, but it also becomes a way for sufferers to connect to each other and (possibly) feel less alone. This support aspect is clearer in the following examples.

Another popular user is Ghosted1996 who only displays her first name Haley on her profile. Haley had 59,000 followers in late 2018 and at the time of writing in July 2020 she has 97,200 followers. Haley lives with bipolar disorder and frequently posts about that and the medications she takes. The comedic aspect of the memes is often accompanied by a critique of capitalism and the health care system in the U.S. For example, one of Haley's early posts is a mockup of an advertisement for the antipsychotic drug Seroquel which is often used in the treatment of bipolar disorder (Haley, 2017a). A picture of a woman with wavy hair is laid on top of the Seroquel name and logo and a blurry version of the side effects text that usually accompanies medication advertisements, and Haley's own words spell out:

"People always ask me how I attain my flawless beach waves. I tell them, 'Well, my medication gives me night sweats/terrors and I wake up drenched every morning along with numerous other side effects (some dangerous) that are irrelevant to the pharmaceutical industry because they care more about profit than healthcare'" (Haley, 2017a)

In the comments section Haley's followers express the resonance of the post with one user saying "hahahahhahaahaha why is this me exactly wow haha seroquel amiright" and others talking about how various drugs have given them night sweats and other side effects. Another example is a meme with two images of actor Shia LaBeouf looking distraught and Haley's text reading:

"Me looking at the state of mental health care in this country and wondering how the fuck mentally ill ppl are expected to go through the arduous process of applying and being accepted for disability benefits if their own doctors (let alone the state or federal government) refuse to take them seriously" (Haley, 2017b) (figure 15).

In the comments section people are posting emojis high-five:ing and sharing their own stories of being diagnosed and misdiagnosed and prescribed various medications, and of having to pay large amounts of money to stay insured or simply not having access to care.

Again, within the various humor styles outlined above, the comedic style of Hava and Haley might be read as aggressive or self-defeating, and thus more likely to belong to someone with a depression diagnosis and can possibly lead to negative effects on health (Greengross, 2019; Kfrerer, Martin and Schermer, 2019). Some of the humor displayed by Haley can be read as self-effacing and harsh, but the engagement with both of the above posts show how such dark comedy also can function as a node around which Instagram users can gather and provide support to each other. This shows the potential of this platform and the internet in general to function as a supportive space for individuals

suffering through mental distress. Through the medium of humorous memes people share their despair and frustrations and can be made to feel less alone. Haley herself said so directly when she was interviewed by Paper Magazine in January 2019 after having been named one of "100 People Taking Over 2019" by the outlet. In the interview she spoke about the support she has gotten from the Instagram community, saying:

> "I've been running my account for about two years now, and the unprecedented amount of healing I've found in the meme community feels like the answer to a question I've never been able to articulate. I'm truly grateful to be a part of this space in time, where conceivably anyone can access free content that assures them they're not alone or crazy for struggling. For a long time I felt like everything I went through was meaningless, but connecting with people who understand me and actually feel comforted by the things I make has shown me I'm capable of creating a silver lining." (Paper Magazine, 2019)

This shows the supportive potential of these online spaces. The role of humor here is similar to what has been described by feminist media studies scholars in relation to feminist online discourses that employ comedy for community building and consciousness raising (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015). In discussion of the Twitter account @NoToFeminism which uses humor to rebuke anti-feminist discourse online, Emilie Lawrence and Jessica Ringrose (2018) write that "the account draws attention to instances of systematic inequality and injustice through humor rather than anger, frustration, or the sadness characteristic of being a 'victim' of sexism" (p. 218). The result is that followers and participants are offered "new, potentially empowering, ways to understand and engage with topics like the wage gap and sexual violence," something that Lawrence and Ringrose mark as "potentially therapeutic" (2018, p. 218). I think a similar thing can be said about the comedic tone among the sad girls on Instagram and how the humor becomes a way to distance oneself from the difficulties of living with mental illness and at the same time feel less alone.

Another aspect of the shared comedic discourse created here is the literacy that is required to understand and "get" the jokes being shared. Kanai (2016) analyzes this in relation to the Tumblr-blog WhatShouldWeCallMe and the memes that circulated among the original creators and its follower blogs. She argues that there is a specific set of "conceptual and socially predicated readerly knowledges [that] enable the literacy required for participation" in this meme (Kanai, 2016, p. 4). In Kanai's example the memes are closely tied to "contemporary feminine practices and digital cultures" and imply an immersion in these discourses (p. 4). In the context of the Instagram sad girls the shared literacy instead concerns having personal experiences of mental illness and psychiatric medications, and in the case of the examples from Haley mentioned above, a firsthand knowledge of the US mental health care system.

Possibilities of sadness and political potential

Another aspect that complicates the relatability of the Instagram sad girls and which is very much part of their shared literacy is the explicit political engagement among them. Whereas the Tumblr sad girls can be read as exploring the potential of impasse and resting in sadness by refusing to work immediately towards a cure, their counterparts on Instagram are often explicitly political. An example in addition to Haley's memes about the US health care system mentioned above, is a post by user manicpixiememequeen, who lists her real name Cori Amato on her profile. This meme features a photo of a woman lying down on a bench at the mall, staring sadly into her phone and holding several shopping bags. On top of the image a text reads: "walking around the mall realizing that we are all slaves to the inescapable system of capitalism

that benefits from the exploitation of our labor & our insatiable meaningless desires" and as a caption Amato has written simply "sad socialist memes" (Amato, 2017b) (figure 16). Another example of this outright political analysis found among the sad girls on Instagram is a post by user @prozac.barbie that features a photo of Kendall Jenner looking sad accompanied by the text "real photo of me trying to reconcile my hatred of the capitalist society I'm part of with my insatiable appetite for material objects I falsely believe will bring me the happiness I crave" (@prozac.barbie 12/23/2017). By inserting political analysis into the stream of sad girl content on the platform, followers learn to associate also critical, anti-capitalist, thought into the experience of mental illness, and connections can possibly be made between personal suffering and larger, structural issues. Amato's posts here could also be read as presenting an alternative to commercialized self-care discourses that encourage consumption to soothe one's anxieties.

This also speaks to the shared literacy assumed in these online spaces. In addition to knowing what it is like to live with various mental health issues, the reader of these memes is also assumed to understand and agree with an anti-capitalist world-view that holds the above analyses of consumption culture and its role in society. This is similar to the "insider/outsider dynamics of being part of a clever, intersectional feminist sensibility" that Lawrence and Ringrose (2018, p. 218) describe in feminist discourses on Twitter. Here the humorous tweets "encourage critical thinking by inviting audiences to be part of a complex set of understandings about power and privilege" that is part of this "intersectional feminist sensibility" (Lawrence and Ringrose, 2018, p. 218). A similar sensibility is being encouraged among the sad girls on Instagram, but in relation to

mental health and capitalism instead of intersectional feminism (although these themes are also present among these sad girls).

SAD GIRLS CLUB

Sad Girls Club is an Instagram account that focuses specifically on providing support and quickly gained traction on the platform. It was started in February 2017 by the filmmaker Elyse Fox, who after releasing a short film about her own struggles with depression (titled *Conversations With Friends*, Fox, 2016) heard from girls from all over the world who thanked her for telling her story (Jacoby, 2017). Judging from the activity on her Instagram profile, Fox did not have a large following before starting Sad Girls Club, but gained micro-celebrity status after the club became popular on the platform (at the time of writing she has 32,900 followers on her private account and the club has 289,000 followers). Looking back at her posts there was an increase in the average number of likes and comments on her posts after Instagram featured Fox and Sad Girls Club on their official account to mark the mental health awareness campaign #HereForYou that the platform organized in May 2017 (Fox, 2017).

The club itself, frequently with Fox as a spokesperson, received a lot of coverage in various media outlets, including mainstream publications like *Forbes, SELF* magazine, *Women's Health,* and the NBC's the TODAY show blog (Fluker, 2018; Jacoby, 2017; Loggins, 2017; Ross, 2017). This suggests that a narrative of helping young women battle mental illness was something that was given attention in the mainstream media at the time, and that aligning yourself with mental health awareness causes was a good branding strategy. The logic in much of this mainstream coverage resembles the language of

mental health advocacy employed primarily by *Teen Vogue*. For example, the headline of

the *SELF* magazine story about Sad Girls Club reads "How Instagram's 'Sad Girls Club'

Is Busting the Stigma Around Mental Illness," (Jacoby, 2017) which aligns with the

awareness discourse that emphasizes the importance of speaking out as discussed in the

magazine chapter. Representatives from the Sad Girls Club also attended the 2018 *Teen*

Vogue summit, showing the connections between the magazine and this part of Instagram

sad girls discourse (Sad Girls Club, 2018a). Fox also participated in marketing campaigns

for the beauty brand Olay and the fashion brand Monki, where she was presented as a

mental health advocate, showing the commercial viability of mental health awareness at

this point in time (Sad Girls Club, 2018c; Sad Girls Club, 2018e).

In contrast to the accounts mentioned above, Sad Girls Club did not only post

memes for other users to recognize themselves in, but had a clear community focus and

arranged in person meetings in New York City where those in need of support could

come together to provide it for each other. Fox, who is African-American, also

emphasized that she wanted to support women of color specifically in their struggle with

mental illness. In an interview with *SELF* magazine she said that the tools to treat and

cope with mental illnesses are widely available, but what is missing is a fair

representation of who struggles with it. What is missing is "a woman of color who's

saying, 'I have a mental illness and I'm happy; I'm living my life and this is how I do it'"

(Fox in Jacoby, 2017). This is important in relation to the above the above mentioned

tensions between the various definitions of the sad girl and the stereotypical sad girl as

someone who has relied primarily on "white bodies as a way of presenting depressive

themes and exploring girlhood" (Alderton, 2018, p. 106). What Fox has done with the

Sad Girls Club is to adopt the term sad girl as one that encompasses multiple racial

identities. By speaking about the lack of nonwhite representations of mental illness she

opens up the figure for identification by girls and others from a range of subject positions,

not only white can-do girls who are fed up with the demands of white girlhood, but also

girls of color whose struggles might have to do with issues like systemic racism and

disenfranchisement.

Sad Girls Club typically posts content that focuses mostly on providing support,

like an infographic about how to help a friend with depression (Sad Girls Club, 2017d) or

a multi-image post about the importance of fighting the stigma surrounding mental health

(Sad Girls Club, 2017c). When thinking about Blackman's (2015) notion of suffering as

ordinary, the activity of the Sad Girls Club could be seen as fulfilling this notion by

merely normalizing psychic suffering and advocating for the acknowledgement of mental

health issues as an everyday part of life that affects a significant amount of people. But

whereas the sad girls on Tumblr tend to rest in a melancholic stance that glorifies feeling

bad, and the sad girls on Instagram rely on humor and comedy to come together around

shared difficulties, Sad Girls Club puts the focus on support. This is not to say that the

other kinds of sad girls do not provide support, or that Sad Girls Club never posts

humorous posts. The club often post memes, but the overall emphasis is on providing

support to other Instagram users and to create space where users can express themselves

and share their feelings, seen in prompts to engage with each other in the comments

sections. One example of this is a post about what to do if you have a friend that is

sharing things online that makes you worried about their mental health (see figure 17;

Sad Girls Club, 2018d). Here Sad Girls Club is sharing a humorous meme about posting

negative things, but by asking what their followers do in the kind of situation described they are opening up for a more serious reading of what might be going on behind the comedic and relatable facade. And most importantly, they are encouraging their followers to connect with each other, which in itself can relieve symptoms by making those who suffer feel less alone.

MY THERAPIST SAYS: The Acritical and Commercialized Sad Girl Aesthetic

It is also worth mentioning the Instagram account @mytherapistsays, which was started in 2015 and reached over two million followers in its first two years (Koman, 2017) (at the time of writing it has 4.8 million followers). It was founded by best friends Lola Tash and Nicole Argiris, who lived in separate cities and decided to start a shared account to post memes. By virtue of its name, the account purports to deal with mental health, but the content frequently covered a more generalized worry regarding "their anxiety-prone twentysomething lives: aggressive crush texting, impulsive shopping, canceling plans in order to sleep" (Koman, 2017) (see Tash and Argiris, 2016a; 2016b). On the spectrum of peer support, micro-celebrity, and influencers, My Therapist Says represents the most acritical and commercialized version of the mental illness discourse happening on these platforms. The two women behind the account have managed to monetize it by turning it into a multifaceted social media brand, complete with an accompanying blog, merchandise shop, and forthcoming book (to be published September 2020).

My Therapist Says rarely went into detail about medications or diagnoses, like the users mentioned above (ghosted1996, binchcity etc) and the critical messages found

among the Instagram sad girls was completely absent. Instead the women running the

account collaborated with big brands like (makeup company) Urban Decay and (dating

app) Tinder to produce sponsored content to share with their followers (Mediakix.com,

n.d.). The website which started as a companion to the Instagram account shows the

professionalism Tash and Argiris have applied to building the My Therapist Says brand.

This website is structured as a blog (categorized into the topics fashion, beauty, lifestyle,

and this+that), merchandise shop (selling t-shirts and sweaters with phrases like "my

therapist knows about you"), and a business division (Mytherapistsays.ca). This last

section features the subheadings press, advertise, media kit, and careers. The "press"

heading features links to several articles about the account and under "advertise"

companies can find information on how to purchase access to the My Therapist Says

audience, boasting about "2 million impressions per post," "75K engagements per image"

and "200K engagements per video" (mytherapistsays.ca/advertise). The media kit

heading leads to an 8-page pdf-file that outlines the case for working with the My

Therapist Says brand, detailing their demographic and their resume of brand partners

(MTS Media Kit 2019). And under "careers" they are advertising three job openings: one

editorial intern based in Toronto, Ontario, one remotely based editorial intern and one

remotely based managing editor (mytherapistsays.ca/careers). All of this content and the

way it is organized shows the seriousness with which Tash and Argiris have turned their

meme-account into a proper social media business. In early 2020 @mytherapistsays was

also one of the Instagram accounts involved in presidential candidate Michael

Bloomberg's campaign's push to reach out to voters via memes (Lorenz, 2020). This

indicates the clout and presumed influence that the account posits also among the mainstream meme-creators on the platform.

My Therapist Says is very similar to the Tumblr-blog WhatShouldWeCallMe that Kanai (2017a, 2017b, 2019) studies, down to the fact that both were started by friends living geographically apart who started a public documentation of their friendship in the form of memes. The same mechanisms of converting frustrations into "funny, bitesized moments" which "produce selves amenable to circulation in a gendered, digital economy of relatability" are at play in both WhatShouldWeCallMe and My Therapist Says (Kanai, 2019, p. 60) The latter frequently manages to take anxieties about working, socializing and having a larger "put together" life and turn them into easily digestible memes. One example that plays on several layers of intertextuality is a photograph of Britney Spears riding in a miniature car made for children (made apparent by the fact that she is much too big for it) accompanied by the text "when u try to act like u got ur life together but clearly shit is falling apart" (Tash and Argiris, 2016c) (see figure 18). In the caption Tash and Argiris have written "Forever always on the verge of a Britney 2007 meltdown," a reference to the public breakdown that the singer went through which was framed as a "trainwreck" (as I discussed in chapter three) and has spawned a large number of Internet commentary and memes (Sieben, 2017). The follower who sees this post will presumably recognize themselves in the feeling of things falling apart, but then that potentially threatening feeling is defused by the humorous image of Spears in the miniature car, and the person viewing the image is presumably left just calmed enough to be able to participate in daily life again.

My Therapist Says also follows Kanai and Gill's (2018) analysis of the "feeling rules" of neoliberalism and the display yet disavowal of injuries common in contemporary media culture, in the way difficult subjects are taken up but only to be immediately made fun of. The fact that Tash and Argiris have successfully turned their Instagram account into a profitable social media company underscores the value of the "gendered, digital economy of relatability" (Kanai, 2019). The focus on relatability is even laid out in the official brand mission of My Therapist Says, as displayed in their media kit and in the advertising section of their website, which reads "the goal of MyTherapistSays was to be a relatable brand, speaking to struggles of a 20 to 30 something woman who's a bit of a mess" (mytherapistsays.ca/advertise).

The account is an example of turning one's followers' worries and anxieties into literal financial rewards, in the sense that it is through their highly relatable content about everyday anxieties that Tash and Argiris have built their following, and it is due to their high follower numbers that they can charge companies for advertisements and sponsored content. In a twisted way Tash and Argiris have managed not only to toe the line of expressing frustrations with contemporary life without sounding like too much or becoming threatening, but they have also excelled at entrepreneurial adaptability in realizing early on that they could monetize their relatability.

A PRECARITY-FOCUSED CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

I want to propose that some of the sad girls discussed above are examples of the kind of "precarity-focused consciousness raising" proposed by the *Institute for Precarious Consciousness*. This scholarly activist collective argues in their 2014

manifesto "We are all very anxious" that anxiety is the dominant affect that holds contemporary capitalism together, and that it functions to control and maintain the unequal status quo. For them this anxiety is closely connected to precarity and the precarious living conditions of contemporary capitalism. One defining aspect of the dominant affect is that it is a public secret, "something that everyone knows, but nobody admits, or talks about" (Institute, 2014). The secrecy is a powerful tool in keeping the affect in place as it keeps it personalized and blame or cause for the anxiety is placed on the individual rather than the larger social and cultural structures which shape the individual's living conditions. But the *Institute* (2014) argues that the dominant affect can be broken down by exposing its social sources, and they advocate a "style of precarity-focused consciousness raising" to move out from under the debilitating grip of anxiety. Taking inspiration from feminist consciousness raising of the 1960s and 70s the collective proposes a form of political action that involves "analysing and theorising structural sources based on similarities in experience." I contend that the sad girls on Tumblr and Instagram are practicing a version of such a consciousness raising.

The *Institute* (2014) presents six points of focus for such a practice. First, precarity-focused consciousness raising must be "Producing new grounded theory relating to experience," meaning that political theory and activist practice needs to connect with the experiences of living in the present rather than older models for understanding power and oppression. The *Institute* (2014) writes, "the idea here is that our own perceptions of our situation are blocked or cramped by dominant assumptions, and need to be made explicit." Secondly, a precarity-focused consciousness raising must "[Recognise] the reality, and the systemic nature, of our experiences," which involves

affirming "that our pain is really pain, that what we see and feel is real, and that our problems are not only personal" (*Institute for Precarious Consciousness,* 2014). Both of these points are seen in the Instagram posts about the defunct mental health care system in the U.S. (Haley, 2017b) and the profit incentives of big pharmaceutical companies (Haley, 2017a) mentioned above, and the conversations that happen in the comments section of these posts where other Instagram users share their own experiences of navigating the health care system and trying different medications. Another example is a post, also from Haley (@ghosted1996), featuring a picture of Uma Thurman in the movie *Kill Bill*, holding up a sword that she seems ready to slay someone with. Above the image Haley has written "me every time I try a new hormonal birth control, knowing that my entire life could be destroyed in the ensuing months while all the cis men around me carry none of this responsibility or risk" while the caption reads: "Anyone tried nuva ring for PMDD? Drop ur experiences in the comments below" (Haley, 2018). Among the 193 comments people share their experiences of trying various birth control, and together with Haley's original post this becomes a small forum where a knowledge of what it means to live through these things is formed and shared.

The third point mentioned by the *Institute* is that a precarity-focused consciousness raising must involve a "Transformation of emotions," which they explain by saying that "people are paralysed by unnameable emotions, and a general sense of feeling like shit" and clarifying that "these emotions need to be transformed into a sense of injustice, a type of anger which is less resentful and more focused, a move towards self-expression, and a reactivation of resistance" (2014). There is a transformation of emotions happening among the sad girls on both Tumblr and Instagram, but most of the

emotions get transformed into humor and a sense of "not being alone," so there is a ways

to go before turning them into an anger that drives action, which the *Institute* advocates

for.

Fourth on the list of what a precarity-focused consciousness raising should entail

is "Creating or expressing voice," expanded on as "the culture of silence surrounding the

public secret needs to be overthrown" (*Institute for Precarious Consciousness,* 2014).

This requirement is met by the sad girls by virtue of the public display of their sadness

and other mental illnesses, and the shared voice that is formed within that discourse. The

next point on the *Institute's* list is the "[Construction of] a disalienated space," which

would serve as a sort of safe space to provide "critical distance on one's life, and a kind

of emotional safety net to attempt transformations, dissolving fears" (2014). The

manifesto clarifies that "this should not simply be a self-help measure, used to sustain

existing activities, but instead, a space for reconstructing a radical perspective" (*Institute*

for Precarious Consciousness, 2014). The more outright supportive accounts in the

online sad girl discourse, like Sad Girls Club, are examples of this kind of disalienated

space. Although these spaces are more about providing direct support and relief, there

may be a few steps left before the radical perspective proposed by the *Institute* is fully

realized. The last point/issue that the *Institute* (2014) lists as crucial for a precarity-

focused consciousness raising is "Analysing and theorising structural sources based on

similarities in experience," expanded on as "the point is not simply to recount

experiences but to transform and restructure them through their theorisation." So this

would be the practice of using the knowledge gained through a multitude of individual

experiences to form a theory of how structures of power and resources work. Wollen's

Sad Girl Theory and the art she shared via her Instagram account and in interviews are

examples of practices that seem to fit with this point, in the act of politicizing sadness as

a protest against patriarchal culture. The disappearance of Wollen from the platform and

her subsequent deletion of the sad girl content speaks to the limitations of using a

corporate platform like Instagram for radical political projects.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed various ways in which young women have written

about their sadness on social media, primarily under the sad girl moniker. For some sad

girl figures (My Therapist Says), the feeling-rules of neoliberalism are promoted. Others

(Tumblr sad girls, Wollen, Sad Girls Y Qué, Hava, Haley, and Amato) contest them

explicitly while others (Sad Girls Club) are seeking precarious forms of solidarity.

Relatability is present in various ways in all of the examples of sad girls discussed

in this chapter, where the display of vulnerability is often accompanied by something

humorous so as to make it less serious. But this relatability is employed in different ways

by the different actors involved. My Therapist Says creates memes about smaller

anxieties to sustain their brand of relatability in a more lighthearted way that makes them

appealing enough for partnerships with big companies like Tinder and Urban Decay. The

sad girls on Instagram – like Hava, Haley and Amato – create memes about heavier

topics that are relatable to those who share their experiences of various diagnoses but also

their opinions on the US health care system and late stage capitalism. In this figuration

the humor does not turn the experiences into "funny, bitesized moments" that fit into "a

gendered, digital economy of relatability" (Kanai, 2019, p. 60), but functions as a coping

mechanism that creates connections between the sad girls and their followers, who can come together in their despair over the state of the world and their psyches. A similar thing happened among the sad girls on Tumblr, in their practice of resting in sadness and the exploration of the impasse of acedia and melancholia found there. Like this the sad girls of Tumblr and Instagram represent a kind of rupture in the relatability paradigm, in that those participating in these discourses are encouraged to consider depression, anxiety and mental illness as central aspects of life rather than something to immediately laugh off. This is also why they can represent a way forward for the kind of precarity-focused consciousness raising that the *Institute for Precarious Consciousness* proposes.

Regardless of the platforms, there is a key tension that runs through sad girl aesthetics and communities: there is a risk here of glorifying sadness and mental illness, but paradoxically in the very act of sharing one's feelings online one also learns that one is not alone. In this way all of the examples discussed here does provide some level of support to their followers. In some cases, providing support is an explicit mission and cause, like for the Sad Girls Club. While in others it is an indirect effect of a comedic and sometimes irreverent discourse where followers might come to the profiles of the Instagram sad girls for the memes and to laugh at things that are otherwise serious, but then indirectly they find support in discovering that others feel the same way they do.

By forming discourses where multiple voices and experiences of living with mental illness get to be heard, alternative and multifaceted ways of conceptualizing sadness becomes available in these online spaces. This gives sufferers access to a potentially supportive collective of other sufferers. Here, those who fail to be helped by

traditional psychiatric discourse can get a chance to be heard, learn that they are not alone, and possibly receive non-medicalized modes of support.

The examination of the sad girl figure across several different platforms also showed the limits of cultivating sustained activism of corporate platforms, and of the fickleness of internet phenomena. As I am completing this project most of the Tumblr accounts I studied are no longer active, Audrey Wollen has once again left Instagram (this time deleting her account), and Sad Girls Y Qué have not updated their Facebook or Twitter accounts since 2016. Both Sad Girls Club and My Therapist Says are still active though, as are most of the Instagram sad girls, even if many of them seem to be slowly moving to TikTok. So far the content created on TikTok is often shared also on Instagram, but the former platform is emerging as an increasingly popular site for all kinds of online activity, including posts about mental illnesses and diagnoses. There is, for example, a trend on the platform of mental health professionals giving advice on things like therapy techniques and unhealthy attachment styles (Wylde, 2020). Future research will have to take such shifts into account and follow the sad girl phenomenon across multiple platforms.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined gendered discourses around mental illness and sadness during the 2008-2018 decade by looking at the conversations surrounding these issues in women's magazines, among female celebrities, and on social media. My research shows that mental health was increasingly discussed in popular media, among celebrities and on social media from 2015 and on.

Summary of chapters

In the world of magazines, this meant increased coverage of issues relating to depression, anxiety, and other diagnoses. *Cosmopolitan*'s articles on mental health largely took the same tongue-in-cheek approach as their coverage of issues like beauty, sex, and work, and did in this way place mental wellbeing into the same fold as those other everyday matters. Their earlier articles adopt an approach that assumes readers might know someone else who is struggling, and the later ones instead assume that their readers have firsthand experience of mental illness. The tone in their articles tends to take a lighthearted and distanced approach to issues of mental health, ensuring a relatable coverage that touch on difficult topics but never veers too far into uncomfortable territory.

Teen Vogue, on the other hand, tended to take a straightforward, earnest, and serious approach to issues of mental health, adopting the language of mental health advocacy and awareness by frequently mentioning the importance of speaking out and fighting stigma. This outlet's branding as "woke" was reflected in the repeated connections made between mental health, inequality, and structures of oppression, as well

as in their overall critical stance towards the pharmaceutical industry. Support was a key issue in *Teen Vogue*, with articles about sensitive topics frequently accompanied by the phone numbers to suicide prevention hotlines or linking to other resources. Pieces in the latter outlet also tended to provide substantial context and information about the diagnoses and difficulties discussed, even in relation to celebrity reporting and easygoing listicles, something that was not the case in *Cosmopolitan.*

The examination of these publications' mental health coverage shows that while *Cosmopolitan* tended to follow a script for postfeminist media - full of contradictions, covering serious topics in a tongue-in-cheek way that undermined any gravity, *Teen Vogue* did offer a more nuanced portrayal of mental illness that incited its readers to a more critical and engaged interpretation of the dominating biomedical paradigm.

When it comes to female celebrities the health narratives of Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez show that the mental breakdown and subsequent comeback narratives that were once the prerogative of male celebrities now are also available for women to adopt. Lovato's repeated setbacks and confessions especially suggest that female stars can now cast themselves as masters of self-transformation with the help of biomedical diagnoses and intimate confessions about what is happening behind the scenes. Gomez's health narrative confirms that acknowledgements of mental distress are available also to "spectacularized can-do" girls (Projansky, 2014) who were previously portrayed as successful and well-adjusted. For both Lovato and Gomez, the confessions about mental distress have served to strengthen the authenticity and realness of their celebrity brands, where their continuous struggles and the disclosure of them become the basis of intimate connections with fans. A cynical reading of their celebrity health narratives may propose

that the openness about mental health is just a sign of their teams adopting to an increasingly intimate media landscape where micro celebrities have set the tone for the levels of personal details that need to be shared to maintain strong connections to fans. But a more spacious analysis of what is happening would also acknowledge the support that their fans gain through them being open about these issues, as expressed by Lovato's fans in *Stay Strong* and on Twitter after the singer's 2018 overdose.

In this chapter I also discussed what I term a postfeminist sadness, by accounting briefly for the emergence of Lana del Rey on the music scene in 2011-2012 and the controversy she caused at the time by displaying female weakness in a popular culture saturated with female strength. At the time del Rey was characterized as an anti-feminist for singing about female vulnerability and dependence on men, but five years later Gomez says in an interview with Vogue that she wants girls to "feel allowed to fall apart" (Vogue.com, 2017), reflecting a significant shift in dominant media culture towards female expressions of weakness. The emergence of del Rey and Gomez's statement a few years later suggest that they were both responding to an overtly positive and empowerment focused contemporary feminine culture, and that their subsequent successes speak to a yearning by audiences for representations of negative affects like sadness.

In the worlds of social media, young women write about their sadness and mental illness diagnoses in a variety of ways. For some sad girl figures (My Therapist Says) the feeling rules of neoliberalism are promoted, while others (Tumblr sad girls, Wollen, Sad Girls Y Qué, Instagram sad girls) explicitly contest them.

Relatability was a key theme also here, but whereas the *Cosmopolitan* coverage added humor to keep a distance to the topics, the humorous memes shared on Tumblr and Instagram often functioned as coping mechanisms that created connections between the sad girls and their followers, who could come together in their despair over the state of the world and their psyches. In this way these sad girls represent a kind of rupture in the relatability paradigm, in that those participating in these discourses are encouraged to consider depression, anxiety and mental illness as central aspects of life rather than something to immediately laugh off. This is also why they can represent a way forward for the kind of precarity-focused consciousness raising that the *Institute for Precarious Consciousness* proposes.

My research shows that social media platforms provide several different ways of conceptualizing sadness and mental illness, from the sad girls of Tumblr who rest in the inertia of depression and romanticize the melancholy of artists like Lana del Rey, to the sad girls of Instagram who place their own struggles alongside critical readings of contemporary capitalism.

So what?

So why does it matter that more media attention was given to women undergoing depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses? It matters because women's media culture up until this point was highly focused on the upbeat and the positive, with a tendency to privilege feelings like confidence (Gill & Orgad, 2015), empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2018b), shamelessness (Dobson, 2015), and resilience (Kanai, 2017). As other scholars of the negative affects that do appear in this landscape have shown, the

presence of affective dissonances may be interpreted as a problematization of the "accessibility and appeal of highly individualist career-oriented lifestyles idealised in cultural mythologies of powerful "can-do" girls" (Dobson and Kanai, 2018, p. 1). But in other instances female rage enters the mediated public sphere only to be "simultaneously contained and disavowed" (Orgad and Gill, 2019, p. 596). And in yet another figuration, the repeated use of "fuck" might signal an irreverent feminist rage that rejects respectability politics along the lines of gender, race, class and sexuality, in an ultimately hopeful way (Wood, 2019).

The increased mental illness awareness that I have examined in this dissertation functions in similar ways. Some of the attention given to women's sadness and mental illness speaks to the failure of an overtly positive women's media culture, like Audrey Wollen, Lana del Rey and the sad girls on Instagram and Tumblr. But in other instances, like in *Cosmopolitan*, depression and anxiety are presented in relatable and distanced ways that serves to make it manageable and nonthreatening of the status quo.

I contend that the increased attention to mental illness and sadness was a response to a culture overtly focused on the positive and upbeat, and that the surge in representations of negative affects spoke to the dissatisfactions among women.

<u>The relatability paradigm</u>

The way mental health has been talked about looks different in different media sites. The relatable coverage found in *Cosmopolitan* presents an unthreatening way of talking about the things that might otherwise be too difficult to talk about. This can also be understood in a frame of a marketing and branding shift towards more relatable and

intimate coverage, within which talking about mental illness is another way of establishing intimate connections with readers and reaching them with even more "real" topics. This seems to be the logic behind the increase in celebrity confessions – in an increasingly intimate media landscape, disclosing experiences of mental illness makes the celebrity appear more authentic and real to fans.

Sharing first-hand stories of depression, anxiety, or other similar experiences is now part of the norm for stars. But these disclosures often appear in relatable and distanced ways where fans can have sympathy and recognize themselves without ever becoming so uncomfortable that they stop being consumers. This means that the difficulties of living under late-capitalism/neoliberalism are being partly acknowledged, but they tend to be recognized in ways that largely maintain the hold of the upbeat and overtly focused eras.

One example of this is Demi Lovato, who in her tell-all documentaries, books, music, and on social media has shared several of her difficulties and reinvented herself over and over again. In the end of March 2020 Lovato shared a letter on her Instagram account announcing the launch of a collection of workout clothes in collaboration with the brand Fabletics (Lovato, 2020). In the post Lovato explains that she had gone back and forth about whether or not to release the line due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After "sitting down to reflect for a few days," Lovato's team decided that "there's no better time to inspire others with my capsule, which has always been about channeling your inner strength." She explains that $5 of every item sold will go to frontline workers, and then states that "it's so important for us all to feel empowered, invincible, and strong from the inside out. My collection is designed to do just that–uplifting you with bold

colors and amazing contouring for the biggest confidence boost." Before ending the note Lovato asks: "I hope you'll join me on our journey to project positivity, build inner strength, and boost each other up!" (Lovato, 2020). This shows that Lovato's health narrative can successfully include both acknowledgements of repeated weaknesses and flaws that are overcome successfully and then go back to promoting the confidence, strength, and positivity so characteristic of neoliberal and postfeminist media culture. The fact that Lovato has suffered and come back from it adds authenticity to her calls for empowerment and strength - she has been at the bottom and returned, so she must know the importance of cultivating resilience.

Relatability's political dimension as a source of support and solidarity

Beyond a cynical analysis that reads every celebrity confession as a marketing strategy, it also has to be acknowledged that the openness of celebrities and mainstream popular media provides opportunities for support to be given to fans, readers, and followers. This happens partly in the act of reading/hearing/seeing about someone with the same issues as oneself and learning that one is not alone, which may in itself serve a soothing and supportive function. But also in the possibility to connect with peers or professionals. This connection can happen between fans, like among Lovato's fans on Twitter after her overdose, between followers on social media who find each other in the comments section, or in *Teen Vogue*'s direct provision of National Suicide Prevention Hotline numbers and other resources. In all of these instances an added step, beyond merely relating to each other in recognition happens, in that some form of action happens to better the situation for the one suffering who has sought out these media.

Relatability also has a political dimension as a source of solidarity, primarily among the sad girls on Instagram. Here memes that combine mental illness symptoms and political critique function to both create humor and distance to a difficult experience (living with depression/anxiety/bipolar disorder) and produce connections around the despair of the state of the world. The smooth and acritical relatability is somewhat ruptured, in that it is mixed with anticapitalist messages about things like the connections between the US health care system and Wall Street. Here users come together in humor and provide support in a critical context. A similar thing could be said to happen in *Teen Vogue*, where a critical stance towards the status quo is holding steady throughout its coverage.

The tension between reparative and paranoid readings

Lastly I want to revisit two of the questions posed in the introduction. First, what happens with the infinitely capable neoliberal subject when she acknowledges weakness? And the indirect question about whether or not the mere presence of mental health awareness constitutes a challenge to a culture focused on happiness and success. Or, in other words, whether it is automatically a "good" thing to talk more about depression, anxiety, and other issues that affect our psyches?

These questions point to a tension that runs throughout this project - between reparative and paranoid readings of popular culture. As I set out to analyze the magazines, celebrity statements and social media worlds, I sought to do an optimistic anti-racist queer reading that was reparative rather than paranoid (Projansky, 2014; Sedgwick, 2003). This meant that I was on the lookout for portrayals of mental illness

and health that provided more spacious ways of feeling bad and potentially could

constitute challenges to a success-focused and individualized neoliberal framework. What

I found was that weakness and failure on their own do not undo the potential of the

infinitely capable neoliberal female subject as long as she keeps working on herself to get

better. Lovato's celebrity health narrative in particular shows this, with her repeated

failings and comebacks. In conjunction with her successful comeback at the 2020

Grammys and the Super Bowl, Lovato spoke in interviews about how she had ditched her

previous team (the one that took center stage in *Simply Complicated*) due to their lack of

properly supporting her emotionally[12].

That Lovato chooses to be open about this change in management despite that the

very team she is now denouncing appeared as the saviors in her 2017 documentary

suggest that failure and weaknesses themselves are no longer enough to derail a

celebrity's career, as long as she is open about the difficulties and works to overcome

them. Being open about struggles instead becomes a way of cementing the authenticity of

the star speaking out. As I am finishing the last details on this project, in September 2020,

the case of Paris Hilton exemplifies how common it has become for celebrities to share

their traumas. The heiress of the hotel empire, who became known for being rich and

wanting to be famous, has just released a documentary about her life in which she reveals

that she was emotionally and physically abused at a boarding school as a teenager

(Emmanuele, 2020). The film has been marketed as presenting the Paris Hilton "you

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[12] She revealed that she had thought she was cured from her eating disorder only to realize that she spent an excessive amount of time at the gym, to the point where she would take work meetings there so as to be able to get straight back to exercising (Quimby, 2020). In interview with Ellen DeGeneres the singer divulged that her (previous) team had kept all sugar away from her, to the point where they would remove even fruit from her dressing and hotel rooms, for fear of a relapse into bulimia. Lovato described how for six years she was not allowed a proper birthday cake and would instead have to celebrate with a watermelon cut into the shape of a cake (The Ellen Show, 2020).

never knew" and Hilton herself has said that she feels "empowered" to finally speak openly about what she has been through (Emmanuele, 2020; Hilton, 2020).

These celebrity narratives can be read as affirming neoliberal and postfeminist values of self-reinvention and success, and suggest that the mere presence of sad affects does not in itself challenge neoliberal principles. The polished celebrity narratives tend to be relatable stories that present hardships without becoming uncomfortable or threatening of the status quo. But, as I hope to also have shown, alongside these marketable portrayals there are more spacious ways of inhabiting depression and anxiety. *Teen Vogue's* coverage showed what it looks like to place usually personal and apolitical issues like mental illness in dialogue with structural issues like racism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia. And by placing the emphasis on support, the magazine also showed what it looks like to provide readers with resources for tangible ways to get better.

In the worlds of social media, the various iterations of the sad girl and the contexts formed there show how people can share their experiences of depression and anxiety in ways that complicate the regular biomedical narratives and function as nodes of support for those who are suffering. As discussed in the fourth chapter, this could constitute what the *Institute for Precarious Consciousness* (2014) calls a "precarity-focused consciousness raising," but it can also be another iteration of what Allison (2009, 2013) calls "affective activism." Allison identifies this in youth-led activism in Japan, where participants shared their own experiences of attempted suicide in an attempt to combat the high suicide rates in the country. She describes this activism as one that crafts "new forms of sociality to the end not of capital or the market … but of helping

anyone/everyone survive" (Allison, 2009, p. 106). Allison calls this "a vitalist politics

that creates forms of connectedness that, quite literally, sustain people in their everyday

lives" (2009, p. 106). The online spaces where various sad girls can express themselves

and come together in their despair might be seen in a similar way. Through humorous

memes immediate relief is had, users feel less alone, and support can be found.

Final thoughts

As I complete this project in the summer of 2020, the world seems to be in

flames. The COVID-19 pandemic has restructured everyday life for people in almost

every country on earth. The murder of George Floyd at the hands of police sparked global

protests, and a sense that this time something is different, the reckoning with the loss of

black life seem to hit harder than the countless previous times that events like these have

gained attention in US public discourse.

These events are felt in the sites I study here in a various of ways. *Teen Vogue* is

keeping its trend of providing support to its readers with a hub on their website dedicated

to the pandemic titled "Days Derailed: the Coronavirus Crisis"

(https://www.teenvogue.com/collection/coronavirus). Here readers find a collection of

articles about COVID-19 and the global health crisis that has emerged in the wake of the

virus. The topics covered include what we know about the virus, advice for dating during

a pandemic, how to overcome coronavirus anxiety and what to do if you are quarantined

with an abuser (Aronowitz, 2020; Diavolo, 2020; Flynn, 2020; McNamara, 2020). But

alongside these pieces about the private and the personal are also an op-ed titled "The

Coronavirus Pandemic Demonstrates the Failures of Capitalism" (Mallett, 2020) and a

piece detailing the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the Black community

(Nasheed, 2020). Like this the readers who go to *Teen Vogue* for support in a time of

crisis cannot avoid getting informed also about how the unequal distribution of wealth

and institutionalized racism exacerbates the problems of the pandemic.

On Instagram several of the sad girls either did not post during the days after

George Floyd's death, or had black creators take over their accounts. One example was

the user @scariest_bug_ever, who had over 170 000 followers and who used to post

astrology memes and other fairly self-deprecating content. In the wake of Floyd's murder

and the subsequent protests she first had two Black creators take over her account in an

initiative called "re-platforming" (Diary of Angry Black Women, 2020a), something that

several celebrities also did (including Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato). Then a week

later the account name changed from "scariest_bug_ever" to "Diary of Angry Black

Women" (Diary of Angry Black Women, 2020b), permanently transferring the account to

the two Black activists, in a move that repurposed the original sad girl's large platform
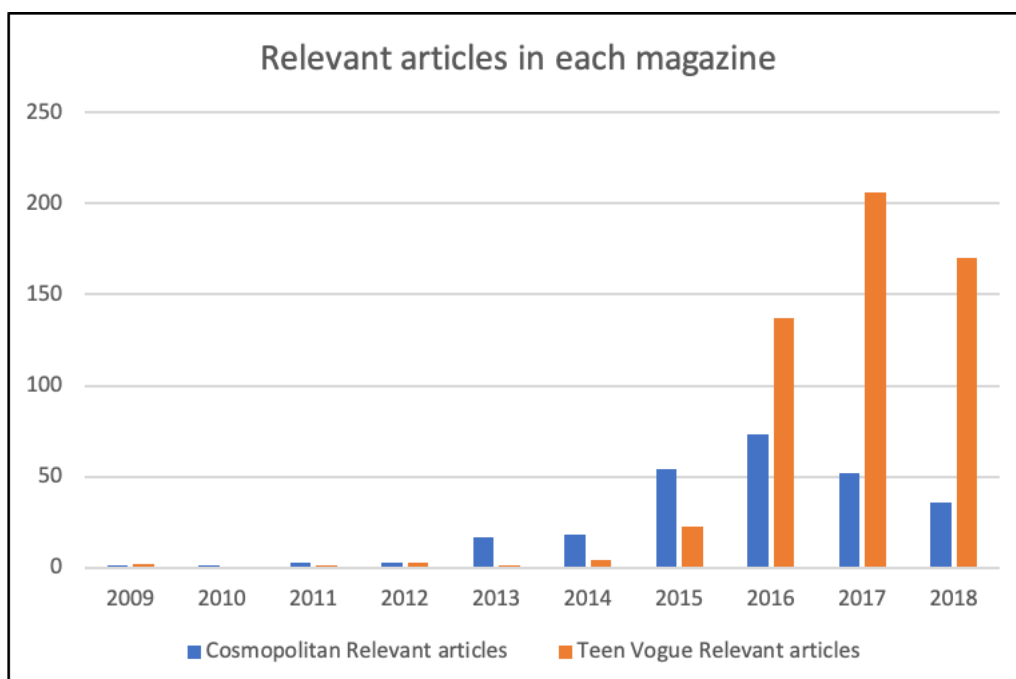
for political purposes.

It is also becoming clear that when people are locked inside they turn to friends

and celebrities on social media to get support, with the spring of 2020 seeing a surge in

online activity among both regular people and celebrities. If difficult subjects were

approached in a relatable way so as to not become too overwhelming even in a pre-

pandemic world, the same mechanism can be seen in the post-COVID media landscape.

Online humorous memes about quarantine, lockdown, and mask-wearing proliferate, and

the relatable approach becomes a way to talk about the difficult things that are going on

but with a distance that makes it less frightening and more manageable. But the surge of

activism that has taken place globally over the spring and summer also speaks to how a distanced approach to difficult subjects may still foster action.
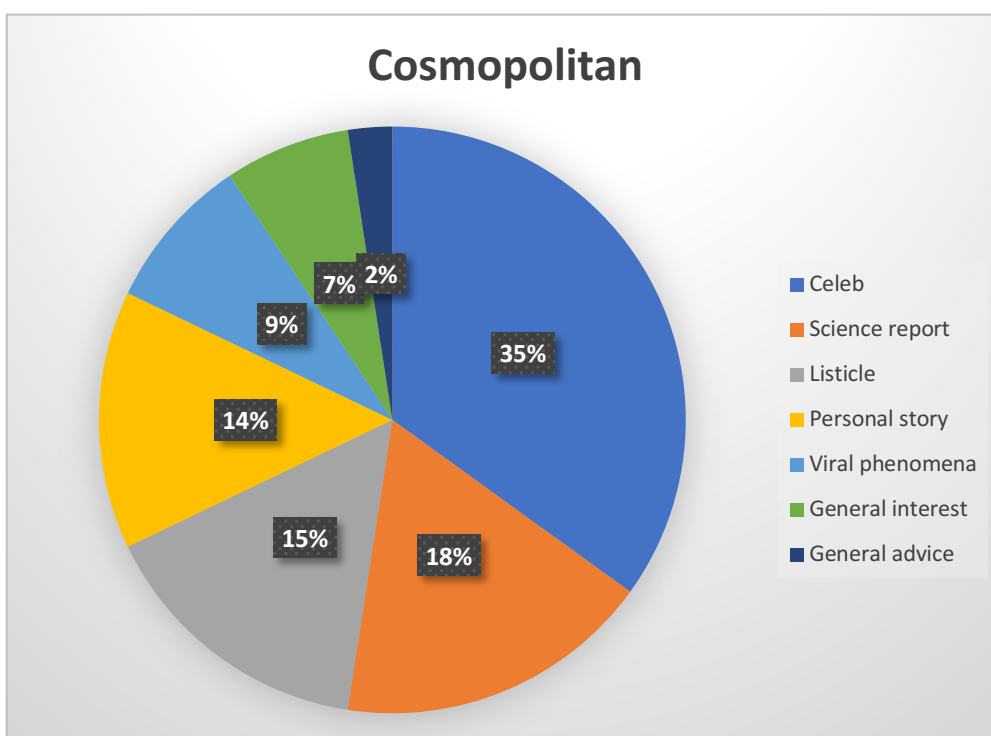
I hope that this project has shown the role of both popular media and social media in shaping perceptions about mental health. The sites I have examined show that there are a multitude of ways to talk about mental illness and to provide support for those who are suffering. These media sites need to be taken into account in efforts to improve mental health care for young girls and women, as well as other groups.
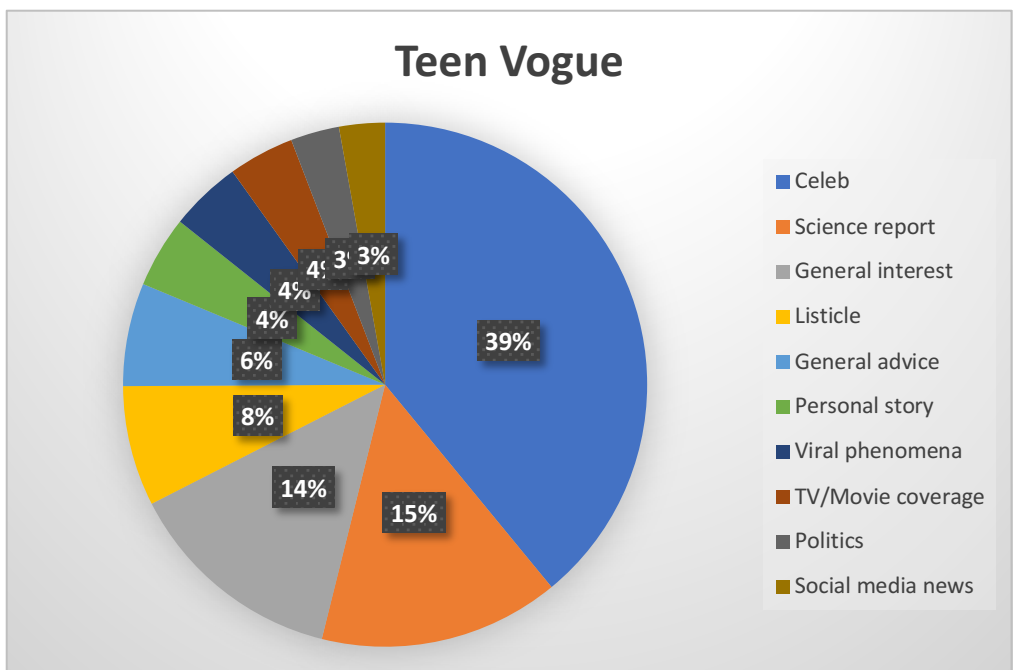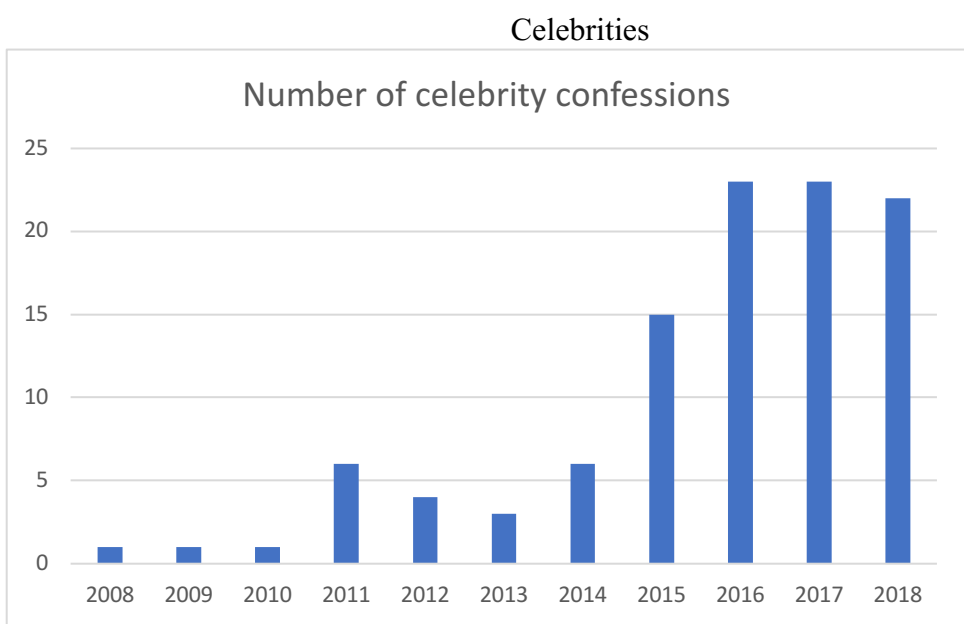
Appendix I – Graphs

Magazines

Graph 1 – Quantity of relevant articles in each magazine

Graph 2 – Article categories, *Cosmopolitan*

Graph 3 – Article categories, *Teen Vogue*

Celebrities

Graph 4 – Number of celebrity confessions by year

Table 1: List of celebrities, year, and diagnosis

Celebrity	year	diagnosis
J.K. Rowling	2008	depression
Winona Ryder	2009	depression
Emma Thompson	2010	clinical depression
Ashley Judd	2011	depression
Catherine Zeta-Jones	2011	bipolar II
Demi Lovato	2011	bipolar, eating disorder, addiction
Gwyneth Paltrow	2011	postpartum depression
Kristen Dunst	2011	depression
Nicki Minaj	2011	depression
Kate Moss	2012	anxiety, nervous breakdown
Leann Rimes	2012	anxiety
Lindsey Vonn	2012	depression
Olivia Munn	2012	social anxiety and trichotillomania
Jennifer Lawrence	2013	social anxiety
Michelle Williams	2013	depression
Oprah	2013	anxiety, nervous breakdown
Lady Gaga	2014	depression, anxiety
Lena Dunham	2014	OCD, anxiety, depression
Miley Cyrus	2014	depression
Rene Russo	2014	bipolar
Sheryl Crow	2014	depression
Troian Bellisario	2014	self-harm, eating disorder
Hayden Panettiere	2015	postpartum depression
Angelina Jolie	2015	depression
Dakota Johnson	2015	anxiety
Halsey	2015	bipolar
Kerry Washington	2015	general mental health
Khloé Kardashian	2015	anxiety
Kristen Stewart	2015	anxiety
Lisa Nicole Carson	2015	bipolar
Mara Wilson	2015	anxiety
Missy Elliott	2015	anxiety
Rowan Blanchard	2015	depression
Sarah Silverman	2015	depression

Shonda Rhimes	2015	social anxiety
Taylor Swift	2015	anxiety
Zoe Kravitz	2015	eating disorder
Adele	2016	postpartum depression
Allison Schmitt	2016	depression
Amanda Seyfried	2016	OCD, anxiety, depression
Ashley Benson	2016	anxiety
Cara Delvingne	2016	depression, anxiety
Dove Cameron	2016	anxiety
Ellen DeGeneres	2016	depression
Emma Stone	2016	anxiety
Glenn Close	2016	depression
Iggy Azalea	2016	psychotic breakdown
JoJo	2016	depression, addiction
Kim Kardashian	2016	anxiety
Kourtney Kardashian	2016	anxiety
Kristen Bell	2016	depression, anxiety
Kylie Jenner	2016	anxiety
Miranda Kerr	2016	depression
Naomi Judd	2016	depression
Rachel Bloom	2016	depression, anxiety
Rosie Huntington-Whiteley	2016	anxiety
Ruby Rose	2016	depression
Selena Gomez	2016	depression, anxiety
Shannon Purser	2016	self-harm
Ellie Goulding	2016	anxiety
Abigail Breslin	2017	panic attack
Alanis Morrisette	2017	postpartum depression
Beth Behrs	2017	anxiety
Busy Philipps	2017	depression, anxiety, binge eating, postpartum depression
Camila Mendes	2017	eating disorder
Charlotte Rampling	2017	depression
Chrissy Teigen	2017	postpartum depression
Elizabeth Vargas	2017	anxiety
Elle King	2017	PTSD, depression

Gabourey Sidibe	2017	depression, anxiety, eating disorder
Gillian Anderson	2017	anxiety
Gina Rodriguez	2017	anxiety
Ginger Zee	2017	depression
Hayley Williams	2017	depression
Keke Palmer	2017	anxiety
Kelly Clarkson	2017	suicide attempt
Kesha	2017	general mental illness
Lili Reinhart	2017	depression anxiety
Mary Lambert	2017	bipolar
Paris Jackson	2017	suicide attempt
Sarah Michelle Gellar	2017	postpartum depression
Zendaya	2017	anxiety
Lena Headey	2017	depression and postpartum depression
Katy Perry	2018	depression
Alyssa Milano	2018	anxiety and postpartum depression
Amanda Bynes	2018	depression, addiction
Amber Tamblyn	2018	anxiety, panic attacks
Ariana Grande	2018	anxiety
Ashley Tisdale	2018	anxiety
Bea Miller	2018	social anxiety
Bella Hadid	2018	anxiety
Camila Cabello	2018	OCD
Claire Foy	2018	anxiety
Gisele Bündchen	2018	anxiety, panic attacks
Janet Jackson	2018	depression
Julia Michaels	2018	anxiety
Kendall Jenner	2018	anxiety, panic attacks
Mariah Carey	2018	bipolar
Mayim Bialik	2018	depression
Meghan Trainor	2018	depression anxiety
Mel B	2018	suicidal ideation, PTSD
Noah Cyrus	2018	depression, anxiety
Patti Murin	2018	anxiety, panic attacks
Serena Williams	2018	postpartum depression
Shay Mitchell	2018	depression anxiety

Appendix II – Figures
Magazines

> **4. People asking you *why* you're on antidepressants is rude as hell.** OK, I know this might sound crazy, but I take them because I have this disease called major depressive disorder.

Fig. 1 – "16 Things Only Girls On Antidepressants Will Understand," Kimora Lee Simmons

> **9. People who ask you if you've tried a "natural" solution, as if they're being *really* helpful.** Have you tried not offering unsolicited advice to me?

Fig. 2 – "16 Things Only Girls On Antidepressants Will Understand," Molly Ringwald

Celebrities

Fig. 3 – Demi Lovato: Stay Strong poster   Fig. 4 – Demi Lovato: Simply Complicated

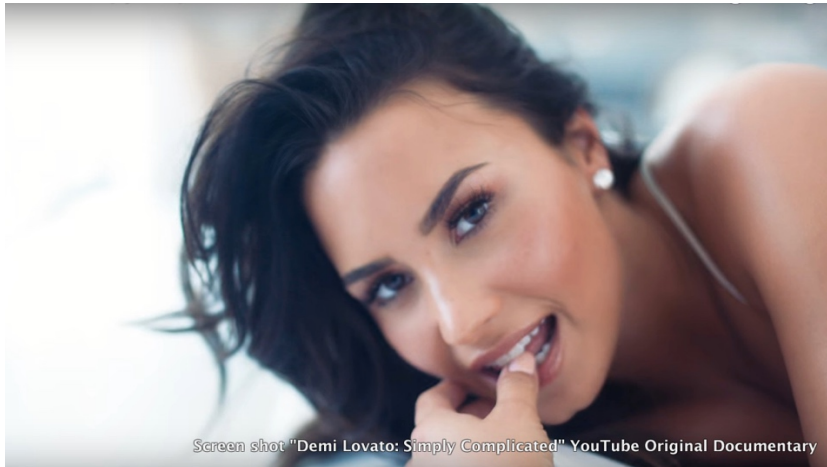Fig. 5 – Still from Demi Lovato: Simply Complicated

Fig. 6 – Still from Demi Lovato: Simply Complicated

Fig. 7 – Selena Gomez "Bad Liar" cover art

Socially mediated sadness

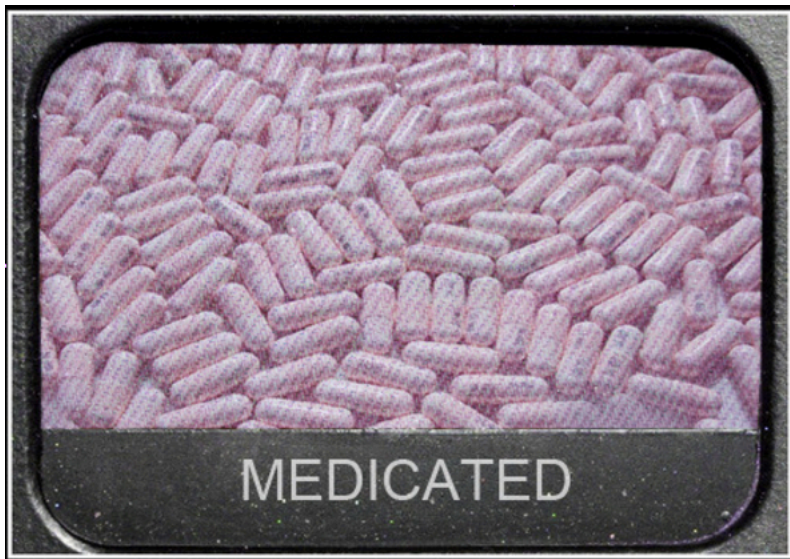Fig. 8 – Typical Tumblr sad girl content 1

Fig. 9 – Typical Tumblr sad girl content 2

Fig. 10 – Typical Tumblr sad girl content 3

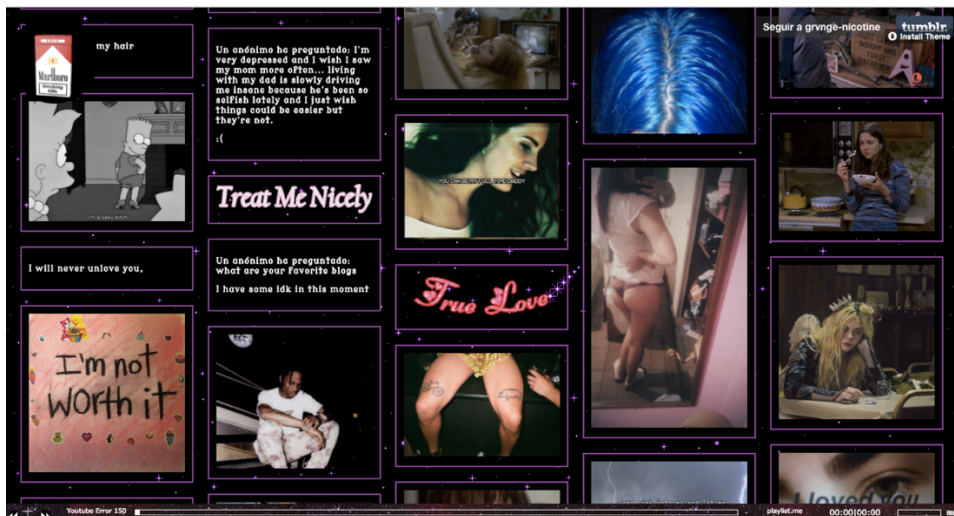Fig. 11 – The header of Tumblr user Grunge-nicotine's page

Fig. 12 – The composition of Tumblr user Grunge-nicotine's page

Fig. 13 – Audrey Wollen's interpretation of *The Rokeby Venus*

Fig. 14 – Julia Hava/@binchcity's "Girls just wanna have serotonin" (Instagram post)
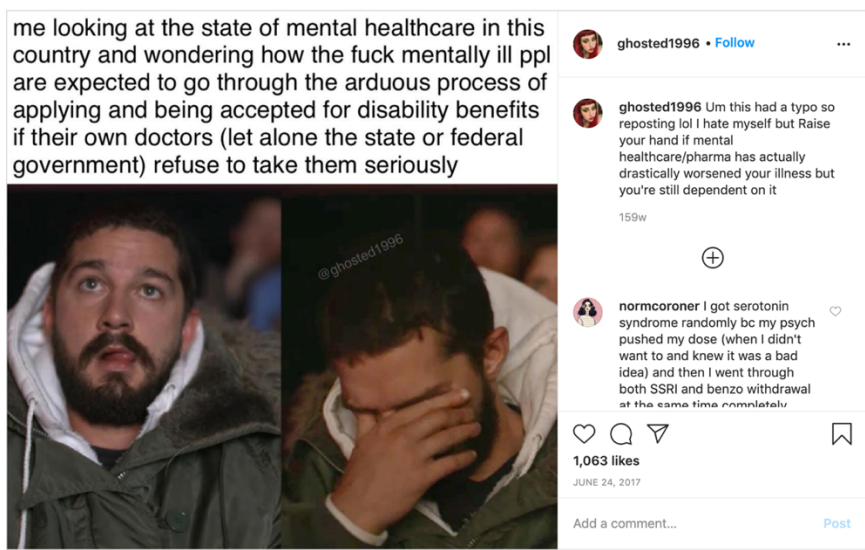

Fig. 15 – Haley/@ghosted1996's US healthcare meme (Instagram post)

Fig. 16 – Amato/@manicpixiememequeen's sad socialist memes (Instagram post)

Fig. 17 – Sad Girls Club (Instagram post)

Fig. 18 – My Therapist Says (Instagram post)

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