Sadness and mental health awareness seem to be everywhere in the popular media landscape of the 2020s. 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, British royal Prince Harry participating in the launch of a mental health app to aid military service members while his wife Meghan Markle revealed that she had been suicidal in their widely publicized interview with Oprah, to one of the biggest pop stars of the moment being Billie Eilish, a young woman making sad, dark songs while openly talking about her own struggles with depression.¹

The presence of sadness and mental illness awareness in mainstream public culture is a fairly recent phenomenon. Several scholars have defined the media landscape of the early twenty-first century as focused on happiness, creating a culture that privileges the positive and energetic while dismissing pain, injury, and failure.² 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.”³ 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.\textsuperscript{4} Scripted characters with various psychic ailments pop up across the TV and movie landscape.\textsuperscript{5} On social media platforms young people are self-identifying with the moniker “sad girl,” inhabiting a position that places negative feelings at the forefront. And there is an endless stream of accounts that offer support for various diagnoses and general self-care, made up of both amateurs and mental health professionals who supply their followers with advice and relief.\textsuperscript{6}

How did the positive media landscape of the early 2000s turn into one that frequently addresses mental illness and trauma? \textit{21<sup>st</sup> Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture} charts the shift in Western media culture from a primarily positive and upbeat affective register to one that has space for some talk of negative and downtrodden feelings. I examine the increased visibility of mental illness and sadness in popular Anglo-American media by analyzing a set of texts about depression, anxiety and general mental illness. These texts come from three primary sites—women’s magazines, female celebrities, and social media—chosen for their function 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, Christina Scharff, Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker, 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.\textsuperscript{7} I look at these contemporary iterations of mental illness specifically in relation to gender, following thinkers who define women as ideal neoliberal subjects.\textsuperscript{8} Women in particular are hailed as subjects of capacity that have the potential for great success if they just work hard enough on themselves (more on that below). Depression, however, is associated with debility and the incapacity to act.

Feminist scholars have also written about the psychic life of neoliberalism and postfeminism, 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.\textsuperscript{9} The feelings that are privileged here tend to be positive ones:
confidence, empowerment, shamelessness, and resilience. Attention has also been given to the appearance of negative affects in this otherwise positive emotional landscape. Examples of this include Amy Shields Dobson and Akane Kanai’s study of affective dissonances in post-recessional television shows aimed at young women, Shani Orgad and Gill’s exploration of mediated female rage in the #MeToo era, and Helen Wood’s 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.” But in other instances female rage enters the mediated public sphere only to be “simultaneously contained and disavowed.” 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. Rage in particular appeared as a powerful affect from which to build feminist politics after the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Activist-scholar Brittney Cooper has, in the tradition of Audre Lorde, called for an “eloquent rage” that is especially important for black feminist action as a source of energy that gives strength to keep fighting as well as clarity in what needs to be changed.

Orgad and Gill have brilliantly described how the imperative to confidence for women within twenty-first-century media culture often works to dismantle feminist messages of their structural critique and place the solution to social injustice on the individual. By working on their confidence and self-esteem, women are presumed to overcome systemic issues. Orgad and Gill also acknowledge a seemingly contradictory move, which they call “the vulnerability turn,” where women are encouraged to express their weaknesses, insecurities and self-doubts. But rather than challenge the confidence cult, this vulnerability works to reinforce it, where brands often introduce insecurity only to replace it with “defiant individualism.”

Angela McRobbie also identifies this tendency to allow weakness in contemporary media culture, but she defines it as the “imperfect” and places it within a triangulation of affects expressed as the “perfect—imperfect—resilience.” Here the perfect encourages women to succeed meritocratically in a highly competitive environment that favors a neoliberal “leadership-feminism.” The imperfect is then expressed as a response to the “unviability of the emphasis on success,” but it is articulated within
severely limited parameters and quickly followed by a resilience that “springs into existence as a ‘bounce-back’ mechanism.”

My book takes off from these previous theoretizations and looks at what I call the “turn to sadness” in twenty-first-century media culture. My analysis shares similarities with both Orgad and Gill’s vulnerability turn and McRobbie’s imperfect, in that it describes what I term a “profitable vulnerability” that allows for market-friendly iterations of weakness that fit within the otherwise largely positive affective register of mainstream media culture. But in addition to this profitable vulnerability, I also delineate more spacious ways of feeling bad within the sad girl culture(s) of social media. What I hope to do in this analysis is to look closer at how sadness as both diagnosis and general affect is allowed to take up space in various media texts and what it can tell us about the state of psychic ailments, healing, and recovery in relation to neoliberal capitalist knowledge systems.

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. 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.” One aspect of this guidance was the supportive function provided by these magazines, where experts answered questions about everything from relationships 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). Since the start of the twenty-first 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. 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. 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health 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.

When it comes to social media, the popularity of various platforms and the trends that proliferate on them shift with great speed. I do not make any claims to definite truths about the culture of various social media platforms, rather I hope to provide a snapshot of what the conversations around mental health looked like during the 2010s on the specific platforms discussed. And as any astute observer of social media knows, niche cultures proliferate with remarkable speed and no static description of them can accurately portray their complex dynamics. Nevertheless, I here attempt to capture a glimpse of how mental illness and sadness took shape in the digital worlds of the 2010s.

Within the frames of this book I define the contemporary moment as the period from 2008 and onward, 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. The data collection for this project originally covered the time frame 2008-2018, as a way to make it manageable. The bulk of material that my analysis is based on comes from this period, but relevant events that took place after this time frame has also been included where appropriate. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, started after I had concluded my first analysis of the material. This is thus not a study of how COVID has changed how mental health is talked about in the media. It is rather an examination of how the popular media landscape has, successively since 2008, become more and more intimate and conducive for conversations around previously private topics like depression and anxiety, something that came to a head during the pandemic year of 2020. Because what became obvious early on in the COVID-19 crisis was 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 were stuck inside, many turned 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.
Guiding Questions

21st Century Media and Female Mental Health examines the contemporary structure of feeling 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. Other common diagnoses, such as bipolar disorder, also appeared repeatedly in my media archive and have also been included.

My analysis 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 questions guiding me 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, who “draws on a feminist
media studies methodology in pursuit of optimistic anti-racist queer readings” 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 and the expressions of sadness and pain that received the most attention online during the time period I examine have been criticized for only referring to white women. 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 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. Teen Vogue also publishes pieces about the connection between mental health and structural inequalities regularly.

It is particularly within the online spaces that I have found what resembles subversive portrayals of living with depression, anxiety, and other diagnoses. I discuss the activity by some of the sad girls on Tumblr and Instagram with the scholarly activist collective Institute for Precarious Consciousness’s 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 “it’s complicated.” The example of Meghan Markle revealing that she had been suicidal while living as a royal in a widely publicized interview with Oprah is illustrative in this regard. On the one hand, a cynical reading of the situation might be that Markle and her prince husband choose to align themselves with mental health causes and revealed some personal struggle to appear authentic and relatable (a belief expressed by various pundits at the time). This analysis can be true but one must at the same time acknowledge that Markle’s confession opened up space for the acknowledgement of what it means to live with depression and suicidal thoughts in social contexts where such issues have been taboo. 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.

My aim with this book is to explore multiple aspects of contemporary gendered mental health discourse, both the “bad” and the “good.” The arguments of Orgad and Gill and McRobbie mentioned above, which describe the presence of vulnerability and weakness in media culture as largely feeding back into the neoliberal logic of confidence and resilience, are compelling. I follow their understandings and add primarily two elements: 1) I look at what the sanctioned vulnerability looks like——how it functions as a generator of authenticity that forms close relations between brand and follower; and 2) I do a reparative reading that also acknowledges the more spacious ways of feeling bad that the increased conversations around mental health open up, primarily on social media within the sad girl culture there. I hope the reader can keep these two aspects in mind at the same time and hold space for complexity and nuance.

Notes on Methodology

In terms of methodology, I conduct 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). In my analysis, I have looked for specific mentions of depression, anxiety, and diagnoses like bipolar disorder, while also taking note of statements that convey related psychosocial affects like vulnerability, sadness, and melancholia without directly naming diagnoses. 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 “optimistic anti-racist queer readings” of representations of girlhood I also work with Eve Kosofosky Sedgwick’s calls for reparative, rather than paranoid, critical reading. For Sedgwick, critical theory has for too long been invested in a “hermeneutics of suspicion” 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,” and urges scholars to also engage in reparative readings. A reparative position involves a “seeking of pleasure” and an openness to optimistic readings of a text or situation. In relation to contemporary mental health discourses, this means looking for potentially subversive or reparative aspects in portrayals of depression, anxiety, and other mental illness.

THE EMERGENCE OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY SADNESS

Women’s affective states have a long history of being pathologized under names like neurasthenia, hysteria, and schizophrenia. 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. In Chap. 2 I trace the lineage of these figures since the early modern period up until today.

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. In this framework, all ties between health and structures of inequality are severed, and any attempts at politicizing widespread ill health are thwarted. 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health shows that this mode of thinking about mental health is dominant, but not all-encompassing in contemporary popular culture. There are
plenty of examples of a profitable vulnerability that is shared to strengthen brands’ authenticity, but there are also 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.

One of the arguments I make in this book 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. 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.*[^40] 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.[^41] The song is ostensibly about a girl very much in love with a boy who likes to play video games, and who gives 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.[^42] 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.'[^43]

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.” In the pop cultural climate of 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.

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.” 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. 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 (explored in Chap. 2). But they are examples of a kind of sad aesthetic that emerged in the 2010s and very much also took shape online. Zoe Alderton, 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.” 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.” Important to note here is that the girls associated with this kind of sad expression tend to be white and thin, and the possibilities this position offer are thus limited (something I explore more in Chap. 5).

21st Century Media and Female Mental Health 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, 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. 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 nonthreatening ways, following Akane Kanai’s 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 micro-celebrities, and in some of the more commercial “sad girl” accounts on social media. This kind of representation of mental illness largely takes the shape of a “profitable vulnerability” that serves to show acceptance and tolerance of weakness while keeping a distance/remaining unthreatening. This vulnerability becomes profitable in that it strengthens the authenticity of a brand, something seen clearly in the celebrity health narrative of Demi Lovato (explored in Chap. 4).

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. 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.

But alongside examples of profitable vulnerability are also more critical accounts where mental wellbeing is presented as a more complex issue and frequently connected to power structures and inequality. These accounts are largely found in Teen Vogue, whose contemporary branding attempts
to construct girls and young women as political subjects with agency, and among the more radical sad girls on Instagram who tend to critique the US mental health care system and the state of capitalism. This kind of sad girl culture offers more spacious ways of feeling bad that include both a systemic critique and direct support.

ON TERMINOLOGY, CONTEXTUAL SPECIFICATIONS, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

A note on terminology and the contextual specifications of the book is appropriate here. First, I largely use mental health and mental illness interchangeably throughout the book. This is partly due to a linguistic choice, repeating “mental illness” over and over would become tedious. But it is also a reflection of the discourses I analyze, where the two terms are used interchangeably to designate both “heathy” and “ill” aspects of the psyche. Mental health awareness generally encompasses factors that are both “good” and “bad” for a healthy mind, whereas mental illness awareness tends to mean knowledge about specific diagnoses. There is a slippage here, then, but it is largely influenced by a slippage present in the popular discourses examined, where definitions of what is exactly entailed by “depression” and “anxiety” are often absent. This lack of clear definitions is itself an aspect of the popular discourses, and in my analysis I ask about what meanings are actually conveyed about what it means to be “depressed,” “anxious,” or “bipolar.”

Second, this book focuses on media texts from the Anglo-American world, with a primarily US perspective on discourses around mental health and illness. I thus make no claims to account for non-Western debates around these topics, even if a global perspective surely would add interesting insights into how the psyche is conceived of in the contemporary world, such an effort is far beyond the scope of this book.

Additionally, within the US-European context, the emphasis is, when it comes to magazines and celebrities, on mainstream media discourse, which tends to reflect a largely white female demographic. In the world of magazines, the assumed subject addressed by *Cosmopolitan* is a white one in that race is not addressed in a majority of pieces. It looks a bit different in *Teen Vogue*, where racism is a recurring topic and the higher rates of depression among people of color are repeatedly acknowledged. Among celebrities the majority of stars who have spoken out about diagnoses or
traumas tend to be white or white-passing. And on social media, the sad
girl culture examined is largely made up of white subjects, with a few sig-
nificant exceptions. These are Sad Girls Y Qué, a Mexican group of young
women mobilizing the sad girl figure as a protest against machismo cul-
ture, and Sad Girls Club, an Instagram account and meet-up group that
explicitly focuses on women of color dealing with mental health issues.

In acknowledging the often-presumed whiteness of the subject
addressed in the media texts, I hope to avoid falling into the assumption
that depression and the like effects everyone the same and always looks the
same. The way mental illness is experienced is highly determined by one’s
immediate circumstances as well as family and cultural histories. There is a
rich body of scholarship on racial melancholia that connects histories of
colonialism, slavery, and genocide to the present, and defines “the affect-
tive life of racialized existence and the psychic impact of racism as a form
of loss and trauma.” Saidiya Hartman, for example, describes depression
as part of the “afterlife of slavery,” alongside “skewed life chances, limited
access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and
impovery.” Similarly, after the 2015 Charleston church massacre,
in which a white supremacist terrorist shot nine African Americans attend-
ing bible study, Claudia Rankine defined “the condition of black life” as
one of mourning. This line of thinking acknowledges the lived experi-
ence of belonging to an historically marginalized group, whose life pros-
pects are severely limited by ongoing and historical structural violence.
The experience of depression for a black subject in the US might be very
different than for a “white and middle- class subject for whom feeling bad
is frequently a mystery because it doesn’t fit a life in which privilege and
comfort make things seem fine on the surface.” The narratives of mental
illness in the media discourses that this book examines largely belong to
the latter category here, where painful feelings are seen as a mystery solved
by the logic of biomedical diagnoses. I try to show how even that subject
and the pathologizations of her moods and behavior are socioculturally
bound up in particular power/knowledge relations (in Chap. 2, I attempt
to trace what that has looked like historically). But the focus here then is
predominantly on the mainstream conceptions of mental health that,
often without making it explicit, assumes a white and otherwise carefree
subject.
Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Biopolitics

It is also appropriate to define some of the core theoretical concepts that underlie my analysis. To start, 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. I adhere to a broad definition of neoliberalism as the “political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility.”

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 influences the formation of our subjectivities.

I follow scholars who have theorized neoliberalism through the Foucauldian concept of governmentality. 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.” Foucault 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, 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.” 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. Within this logic, something like poverty is not a circumstance with a negative influence over the individual beyond her control; instead, it is the task 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, biopolitics is the management of the life of a population, of monitoring and controlling things like health, birthrate, and longevity of a people. Starting in the eighteenth century, political power stopped being exercised only in the giving or taking of life, and became occupied with the wellbeing 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 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.” 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. 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. 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 call 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.”

Wendy Brown states that “neo-liberal subjects are controlled through their freedom … because of neoliberalism’s moralization of the consequences of this freedom.” Similarly, Lupton writes that “people are compelled to make themselves central to their own lives when they take on the ethical project of selfhood.” 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.

There is a connection here between the call for 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, where what is considered “good, healthy, normal, virtuous, efficient or profitable” 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 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.” This expertise is doled out in official governmental programs as well as various types of “lifestyle media” such as advice-giving in magazines and self-help books.

It is thus within this context of self-optimization and work on the self that twenty-first-century discourses of mental health and illness take shape.

Postfeminism and Popular Feminism

A note on the use of postfeminism and popular feminism is also needed. The scholarly field of feminist media studies, which I am in dialogue with, has employed the term postfeminism to identify the role of feminism in the Western media landscape of the 1990s and the early 2000s. In a much-cited piece from 2007, Gill defined a postfeminist sensibility which permeated media culture at the time. This was signified by a view of femininity as “a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on
individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference.”

Gill makes the argument that the qualities privileged and emphasized within a postfeminist sensibility fits remarkably well with the dictates of twenty-first-century neoliberalism, so much so that women are the ideal neoliberal subjects, constantly called upon to work on and improve themselves so as to become good laboring subjects. Since then, Gill and others have further developed the concept of a postfeminist sensibility, adding, as mentioned above, that both postfeminism and neoliberalism emphasize not only bodily transformation but also psychic improvement. Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of the “psychic life of power,” Gill and Christina Scharff describe the psychic life of postfeminism and neoliberalism. The notion of “psychic life” designates the central role of power in creating and forming our subjectivities. For Gill and others what marks twenty-first-century media is an intense focus on the psychological and a “psychologization of surveillance.” As previously mentioned, there are now calls to not only work on the body but also the psyche, to approve one’s self-esteem and confidence. The postfeminist and neoliberal subject has to continually work on not only its entrepreneurial skills, but its affects.

The theorization of postfeminism has, during the 2010s, been complicated by the emergence of a very visible popular feminism in Western media culture. The relatively new popularity of feminism does not, however, mean that a postfeminist sensibility is now absent from culture. Nor that the messages aimed at women are now straightforwardly feminist in a politically radical way. The feminism that is seen in mainstream media culture is one that sees visibility as an end goal in itself (naming something as feminist becomes more important than working for actual change in laws or policies) and is largely “brandable [and] commensurate with market logics.” In relation to this popular feminism a postfeminist sensibility has taken on a new and more subtle form, where feminism is not completely repudiated but seen as obviously important and rearticulated in “purely individual terms that stress choice, empowerment, and competition.” Orgad and Gill’s definition of a confidence culture that presents individual women’s work on their own confidence as solutions to structural gender inequalities is an apt example of this.

I use the term postfeminist throughout the book to designate this articulation of neoliberal logics in gendered ways, to signify a sensibility that both repudiates feminist notions of structural change and embraces a hollow and individualized feminism.
Feminist Approaches to Affect

Lastly, I want to acknowledge the feminist affect theoretical perspectives that have influenced my own thinking about negative affects like depression and anxiety, as 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.”

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” to recenter the body in scholarly/intellectual thought. Scholars like Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvetkovich, Sianne Ngai, and Sedgwick 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, 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. Ahmed has argued that we look both at the “structure of feeling” and the “feelings of structure,” suggesting that “feelings might be how structures get under our skin.” 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 (Gill and Kanai use this concept to define the “feeling rules of neoliberalism,” which I use as an analytical tool throughout the book). 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 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.

Affect theory thus offers crucial perspectives for understanding how our psychic lives are affected by and constituted through our socio-cultural circumstances.

Chapter Outline

After the introduction offered in this first chapter, the second chapter traces a brief history of how women’s mental health has been pathologized in the American and European West since the start of the modern period. It examines figures of sad and mad women, like the Victorian madwoman, the hysterical, the schizophrenic, and the Prozac-consuming American woman of the 1990s. It traces historical trends in diagnoses, from nineteenth-century neurasthenia and hysteria to twentieth-century schizophrenia and anorexia. Here I also try to account for the historical development of the medical fields of psychology and psychiatry and how they have related to contemporary gender conventions. Alongside this history, I account for feminist interpretations of these various pathologizations. I hope to show that mental illness diagnoses are neither completely discursive (socially and linguistically constructed) nor fixed neurological truths (biological facts of life that always look the same), but emerge and take shape in a complex interplay between sociocultural discourses and an ever-developing medical science.

The third chapter—“Mental Health in Magazines: Relatability and Critique in Cosmopolitan and Teen Vogue”—looks at how the online editions of these two magazines covered depression, anxiety, and related topics during the time period 2008-2018. It builds on an archive of more than 250 Cosmopolitan articles and over 500 Teen Vogue pieces to catalogue the differences in style, voice, and 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. I argue that the attitudes towards mental health found in these two publications are representative of larger approaches, where *Cosmo’s* tongue-in-cheek coverage exemplifies a profitable vulnerability that has become firmly established in popular media. *Teen Vogue* on the other hand reflects a critical and morally aware sad girl culture that offers more spacious ways of feeling bad while acknowledging the role of structural inequality in mental health.

The fourth chapter——“Celebrity Mental Health: Intimacy, Ordinariness, and Repeated Self-Transformation”——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 primarily 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 with their fans via myriad social media channels that put 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.

Lovato’s celebrity health narrative shows how mental distress can be successfully folded into a celebrity brand and enhance its market value, as they have been able to make a literal profit off of work that utilizes the tragic events in their life while reinforcing a neoliberal ethos of self-work and self-transformation, exemplifying profitable vulnerability. But this cannot be read only through a cynical lens that highlights the profitable elements of their suffering, because in sharing their story fans who have been through similar things are able to connect with and give support to each other. Gomez’s health narrative can be read in a comparable way——she waited to share her struggles until the cultural climate was conducive to framing her problems as something that enhanced rather than detracted from her celebrity brand. But at the same time, in the act of speaking publicly about her issues she also opened up new spaces for talking about things like depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. The analysis of these health narratives shows that profitable vulnerability and supportive conversations around mental distress exist in tension with each other in the world of celebrity media.
The fifth chapter—“Social Media Sadness: Sad Girl Culture and Radical Ways of Feeling Bad”—turns to social media platforms and looks at the figure of the sad girl as she emerged online as an indirect response to a popular culture overtly focused on happiness. 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 extra 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 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. This chapter explores how Tumblr sad girls might be seen as resting in sadness; how relatability is employed as a political strategy by some Instagram sad girls; the ambivalence of normalization; and the limits of using commercial social media platforms for meaningful social action. The tension between a profitable vulnerability and supportive spaces is present also here, although the supportive element is dominant in the peer-to-peer networks formed on these platforms.

The final chapter is a conclusion that discusses how, across the three sites, conversations around depression, anxiety, and general mental illness have taken shape post-2008. By tying together the constructions of mental health in magazines, among celebrities, and on social media, the conclusion highlights how a changing media landscape and neoliberal calls for self-optimization have made way for a profitable vulnerability that exists in tension with more radical understandings of psychic wellbeing.

Notes

1. Eells, "Billie Eilish and the Triumph of the Weird;" Frost, "Meghan Markle Says She Sought Help Over Suicidal Thoughts;" Thorne, "HBO to Add Mental Health Disclaimers in Front of Select Shows;" Young, “Prince Harry says people should train ‘mind and body as one’ in video launching mental health tool for military.”
5. Kliegman, “2015: The Year Mental Illness Finally Got Some Respect on TV.”
6. See Chaps. 5 and 6.
15. Traister, *Good and Mad.*
17. Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture.*
19. Ibid, 52.
20. McRobbie, *Feminism and the politics of resilience.*
21. Ibid, 43-44.
27. A piece aptly titled “All Alone in their White Girl Pain” 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. Hip to Waste, “All Alone in Their White Girl Pain,” newsletter blog, August 1, 2020, accessed June 28, 2022, https://hiptowaste.substack.com/p/all-alone-in-their-white-girl-pain.

30. Institute for Precarious Consciousness, “WE ARE ALL VERY ANXIOUS.”

31. Abad-Santos, “Meghan Markle’s honesty about suicidal thoughts in her Oprah interview could help others;” Frost, “Meghan Markle Says She Sought Help Over Suicidal Thoughts.”

32. Orgad and Gill, Confidence Culture, McRobbie, Feminism and the politics of resilience.

33. When I started this research, Lovato had not yet come out as non-binary, and despite their current gender-queer identity, they were still a major figure in American Girl culture in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, which is why I have kept their celebrity health narrative as an example of how mental illness is configured in media culture. Blistein, “Demi Lovato Comes Out as Gender Non-Binary.”

34. Projansky, Spectacular Girls, 21; Sedgwick, Touching Feeling.

35. Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 125.

36. Ibid, 128.

37. Ibid, 137

38. Appignanesi, Sad, mad and bad; Chesler, Women’s madness; Showalter, The female malady.


42. 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, March, 2020, “comment on,” Lana del Rey, “Video Games,” Youtube video, October 16, 2011, accessed June 28, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cE6wxDqdOV0.

43. Schrodt, “Lana Del Rey’s Feminist Problem.”

44. Powers, “Lana Del Rey: Just Another Pop Star.”


46. Ibid, 3.

47. Watson, “How girls are finding empowerment through being sad online.”

48. Alderton, The aesthetics of self-harm, 64.

49. Ibid, 64.

50. Ibid; Farah, “All Alone in Their White Girl Pain.”

51. 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 et al, “Musical trends and predictability of success in contemporary songs in and out of the top charts.”

52. Kanai, “Girlfriendship and sameness;” Kanai, “The best friend, the boyfriend, other girls, hot guys, and creeps;” Kanai, Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture.


55. Cvetkovich, Depression: A Public Feeling, 116; Cheng, The Melancholy of Race; Eng and Han, “Dialogue on Racial Melancholia;” Holland, Raising the Dead; Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia; Khanna, Dark Continents; Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down.”

56. Hartman, Lose Your Mother, 6; see also Cvetkovich, “Depression is ordinary.”

57. Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning.”


62. Foucault, Discipline and punish; Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics.


64. Ibid, 201.

65. Foucault, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, 73.


67. Ibid, 54.


69. Lupton, The Quantified Self.

70. Du Gay, Consumption and identity at work, 124.


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.” 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 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.” Cruikshank, “Revolutions within,” 213, 235.

Greene and Breshears, “Biopolitical Media,” 191.

Rose and Miller, “Political power beyond the State,” 175.

Ibid, 175.

Gill, “Postfeminist media culture,” 147.

Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*;


Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings*.


Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.


Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*; Gill and Kanai, ”Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism.”

Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*. 


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