CHAPTER 5

Social Media Sadness: Sad Girl Culture and Radical Ways of Feeling Bad

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.¹

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).² Like other internet phenomena, the sad girl has taken many different forms and cannot be easily pinpointed 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 the 2010s 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.”³

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 Instagram⁴ as well as covered specific prolific sad girls like artist Audrey Wollen,⁵ writer Melissa Broder (@sosadtoday on Twitter)⁶
and the collective Sad Girls Club. 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.”

So far 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. 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’ examination of the UK based site Elefriends or Anthony McCosker’s analysis of the Australian mental health organization 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, who has written about the way the sad girls of Instagram function as a community and a counter public, and Heather Mooney 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 in the discussion of sad girls that even if this figure was at its most visible online during 2014-2015, that iteration of the figure could be said to have 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. I do not, however, see this as a simple case of cultural appropriation, following an understanding of the term as one involving cultural exploitation and disrespect. It is rather a case of a range of sources influencing a particular cultural expression, and the multiple inspirations behind the figure of the sad girl show the fluidity of cultural sharing and creativity in a digital world. I discuss the specific aspects of this later in the chapter.

Zoe Alderton, 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.” 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.”14 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 judgment 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.15

I follow this approach in my examination of the sad girl phenomenon as I hope to be able to open up discussion toward 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 were fairly equalized due to the distributed forms of posting and reblogging (more on that below), whereas on
Instagram the networks were structured more around a few influential users with large followings who obtain micro-celebrity status. Additionally, there were 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 toward 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.”

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 Prearious Consciousness.

The “feeling rules” of neoliberalism and the notion of relatability are common threads in this chapter. Gill and Kanai point to the social “feeling rules” (after Hochschild) 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.” 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.

And again, these sad girls exist within the confidence culture outlined by Orgad and Gill, where the tendency by female subjects to share vulnerable moments largely is a move to appear authentic and relatable. Even though this is the larger media culture in which the figure of the sad girl emerged, and some of the figure’s iterations are of the lightheartedly relatable kind, I argue that something else is happening in the expression of the negative here. Whereas the vulnerability expressed in the confidence culture is one that has already been overcome, the feelings of despair and anxiety expressed by sad girls are often shared as they happen. The expressions of mental illness and sadness discussed in the previous chapters are largely examples of a profitable vulnerability while the sad girl culture explored here opens up more spacious ways of feeling bad.
Affective Resonance

Anna Gibbs 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.” 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-group of users. Gibbs 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.” 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.” He explains that “OWS started as a meme by meme specialists and then mutated into a meme-generator, flashmob, and platform.” 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.” 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. The site established a reputation among the major social media sites as “a comfortable place to be honest, weird, and maybe even depressed” and
scholars have identified it as particularly conducive for LGBTQIA+ communities and niche fandoms. 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 nonusers (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 counter publics on Tumblr that “with changes in platforms and networks of users, media ideologies shift.” 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. 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.

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 Fig. 5.1); 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.

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 Fig. 5.2). Another is just a picture of a pile of turquoise pills with the imprint “S 90 3.” 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.”

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 about these kinds of topics.

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, Tumblr lends itself to a sad girl aesthetic. 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. For example, user Grvng-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.
Fig. 5.2 “Medicated,” Tumblr post by Grvnge-nicotine, source: Thelandersson, “Social Media Sad Girls and the Normalization of Sad States of Being”

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 Fig. 5.3).

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 by displaying several of their posts together at the same time (see Fig. 5.4).
Suffering as Ordinary

Lisa Blackman’s notion of “reframing suffering as ‘ordinary’” 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).” 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.” 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.” Another post, by user gothicprep, which has been reblogged and liked 58,058 times, reads “how do i contour my abandonment issues?” 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 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.” Later theorists have praised the humorist’s ability for “rapid perceptual-cognitive switches in frames of reference,” 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.” 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, 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.” Later, Martin and his students developed the Humor Styles Questionnaire to assess how individuals use humor in their daily lives, which has been used in hundreds of studies within the field of psychology since. 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”). 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. A 2019 study using the questionnaire found that people diagnosed with depression used self-defeating humor more than nondepressed people, and that depressive individuals used the two positive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing) less than non-depressed individuals. 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” in digital spaces, with feminist memes in particular being marked as tools to create “online spaces of consciousness raising and community building.” 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 and Ann Cvetkovich 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.” Cvetkovich describes how the Public Feelings project uses the term impasse to refer to “a state of both stuckness and potential.” 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.” 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, 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,” a picture of a white t-shirt with the text “I’ve Been Crying All Day” accompanied by a red rose, and a fake resume that includes items like “Battled Depression 2000-2013.” Posts like these present 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 nonaction, 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. The term has generally been considered too religious to be used in understanding contemporary depression. But Cvetkovich 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.” 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 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.” 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.” 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 coexists 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. 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 Chap. 4 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. 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 the 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.” “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 nonsexual 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. 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. 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. 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.

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.” 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.” Here Wollen indirectly marks out the “feeling rules” of the contemporary moment for women and girls that Gill and Kanai write about in relation to neoliberalism and postfeminism, and of which the “confidence cult” 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, 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 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.\textsuperscript{72} 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 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.”\textsuperscript{73} 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 Chap. 4).

Wollen received largely positive media coverage and gained a following of 25,000 on Instagram, which made her into a kind of micro-celebrity. 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.”\textsuperscript{74} 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.\textsuperscript{75}

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.\textsuperscript{76} 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…\textsuperscript{77}
Wollen’s doubts and her reasons for leaving Instagram speak 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.\(^{78}\) 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 with 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. 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 with the platform. One of them says 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.”\(^{79}\) 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.” Run by five Chicana-identified women, the group mainly used a “Tumblr-style Facebook page” to curate images of “alternative icons like Selena [Quintanilla Pérez], animated characters like Sailor Moon, and sex-positive imagery” as well as post “heartbreak poems and notes on depression and solitude.”

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.” Importantly “this image of a crying woman is not a weak victim. She’s tough and conveys a more complex range of femininity.” 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 nickname that is Chicana/Latina in origin, Sad Girl usually refers to a tough girl who has suffered extreme hardships.”

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 at 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.” 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.” In her analysis of sad girls and the figure of the Black Carefree Girl, Mooney notes that the sad girl sometimes uses aesthetics from Latina/x culture in ways that constitute cultural appropriation. 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 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.”

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.” 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.” 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 risk 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. As I briefly discussed in the previous chapter, the celebrities who have been the most vocal and visible about their mental illnesses are white or white-passing, indicating the limitations of that position. Among the sad girls on Tumblr, 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.

**Instagram Sad Girls**

Wollen was not the last sad girl on Instagram, however, and from 2016 and onward, 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 how many likes their individual posts get.90

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. Astrology, leftist politics, and the disappointment of heterosexual men were also popular topics.91 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.92 Some of the most popular users tried to turn their followings 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 June 2022, she has 123,000 followers. In the bio-section of Hava’s Instagram profile, there is a link to her personal website where one can purchase her memes as posters, t-shirts, stickers, or mugs.93 Hava also has a Patreon site, where one can support her work monthly.94 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.95 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 into her hand) next to the words “Girls just wanna have SEROTONIN”⁹⁶ (see Fig. 5.5). Hava has captioned the image “remember to smash your mf [motherfucking] medication today everyone” and at the time of writing it

Fig. 5.5 “Girls just wanna have Serotonin,” meme by Julia Hava, @binchcity
has 20,399 likes and 475 comments. In relation to Blackman’s 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 want to 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. 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, 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.” 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 illness in a way that can be interpreted as crass and self-defeating (within the humor styles mentioned above). 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” 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. And crucially, the display of vulnerability here is not of the kind common in confidence culture——where difficulties are shared after they have been successfully overcome——but rather a display of the real-time experience of taking a range of psychiatric medications as part of everyday life. Hava’s medication haul then is not an example of profitable vulnerability, but rather of a capacious sad girl culture where humor is employed to make fun of both the practice of keeping track of multiple medications and the consumer logic behind makeup haul videos.

Another popular user is Ghosted1996 who only displays her first name Haley on her profile. 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. 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.’ (See Fig. 5.6)
In the comments section Haley’s followers express the resonance of the post with one user saying “hahahahahaha 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.¹⁰⁶ (Fig. 5.7)

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.

Fig. 5.7 Meme about the US healthcare system by Haley Byam, @ghosted1996
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.\textsuperscript{107} 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 from 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.\textsuperscript{108}

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.\textsuperscript{109} In the discussion of the Twitter account @NoToFeminism, which uses humor to rebuke anti-feminist discourse online, Emilie Lawrence and Jessica Ringrose 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.”\textsuperscript{110} 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.”\textsuperscript{111} 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 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. In Kanai’s example the memes are closely tied to “contemporary feminine practices and digital cultures” and imply an immersion in these discourses. 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 toward 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. 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 manicpixiememequeen has written simply “sad socialist memes.” (Fig. 5.8). Another example of this outright political analysis found among the sad girls on Instagram is a post by user @prozacbarbie 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.” 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. The posts here could also be read as
Fig. 5.8 “Walking around the mall/Sad socialist memes” by @manicpixiememequeen

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

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 worldview that holds the above analyses of the 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 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.” 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) heard from girls from all over the world who thanked her for telling her story. 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 37,000 followers on her private account and the club has 261,000 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.

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 NBC’s the TODAY show blog. 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,” which aligns with the awareness discourse that emphasizes the importance of speaking out as discussed in Chap. 3. Representatives from Sad Girls Club also attended the 2018 Teen Vogue summit, showing the connections between the magazine and this part of Instagram sad girl discourse. 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.

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.’” This is important in relation to 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.” 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 or a multi-image post about the importance of fighting the stigma surrounding mental health. When thinking about Blackman’s 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 acknowledgment 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 other 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 posts 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. 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, as an example of profitable vulnerability in the worlds of social media. The account was started in 2015 and reached over two million followers in its first two years (at the time of writing it has 7.5 million followers). It was founded by best friends Lola Tash and Nicole Arigiris, 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.” 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 book.

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 were 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. 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. 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 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. 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 inter-textuality 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.”\textsuperscript{135} 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 Chap. 4) and has spawned a large number of Internet commentary and memes.\textsuperscript{136} 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 Gill and Kanai’s 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.\textsuperscript{137} 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.”\textsuperscript{138} The focus on relatability was even laid out in the official brand mission of My Therapist Says, which was displayed in their media kit and in the advertising section of their website which at one point read “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.”\textsuperscript{139}

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 number of followers that they can charge companies for advertisements and sponsored content. The two women have managed to toe the line of expressing frustrations with contemporary life without sounding like too much or becoming threatening, while also excelling at entrepreneurial adaptability in realizing early on that they could monetize their relatability. My Therapist Says is thus a clear example of the profitability of certain kinds of vulnerability.
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” suggested 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.” 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 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 1970s, 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 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 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.” Both of these points are seen in the Instagram posts about the defunct mental health care system in the U.S. and the profit incentives of big pharmaceutical companies 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.” 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.” 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 are 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.” 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.” 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.” 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* 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. Haley’s (@ghosted1996) Instagram account was also removed from the platform in late 2021, due to an unclear violation of community guidelines (but she is still active on the platform under the slightly different username @ghosted_1996). Instances like this show the precariousness of relying on private platforms whose enactment of rules is often shrouded in an air of secrecy.

**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 and Instagram sad girls, Wollen, and Sad Girls Y Qué) 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 @manicpixie-memequeen——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,” 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 do 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 become 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.

Notes

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2. Newell-Hanson, “2015 the year of... sad girls and sad boys.”


11. Holowka, “Between artifice and emotion: the “sad girls” of Instagram;” Mooney, “Sad Girls and Carefree Black Girls;” My own piece about Tumblr sad girls was published in Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry in 2017, and part of what I discussed there is repeated here, and can thus be seen to have contributed to the scholarly conversation about sad girls as well, Thelandersson, “Social Media Sad Girls and the Normalization of Sad States of Being.”


15. Ibid, 95, italicization in original.


22. Ibid, 133.
25. Alfonso, “The real origins of Tumblr.”
27. Cho, “Default publicness: Queer youth of color, social media, and being
outed by the machine;” Fink and Miller, “Trans media moments: Tumblr,
2011-2013;” Morimoto and Stein, “Tumblr and fandom.”
28. Renninger, “'Where I can be myself... where I can speak my mind,,'” 5.
29. In a 2018 study of the most popular social media platforms among col-
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enough participants named it as their favorite platform. Shane-Simpson
et al, “Why do college students prefer Facebook, Twitter, or
Instagram?,” 279.
30. Grvnge-nicotine, ”Medicated,” Tumblr post, accessed June 22, 2022,
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35. Blackman, “Affective politics, debility and hearing voices,” 26. See also
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what-that-means.
39. Gothicprep, “how do i contour my abandonment issues?,” Tumblr post,
139090742155/how-do-i-contour-my-abandonment-issues.


43. Ibid, 1322.

44. Martin et al, “Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being.”

45. Greengross, “The Relationship Between Humor and Depression.”


47. Greengross, “The Relationship Between Humor and Depression.”


49. Kanai, “Sociality and Classification: Reading Gender, Race, and Class in a Humorous Meme.”

50. Rentschler and Thrift, “Doing feminism in the network,” 329; see also Lawrence and Ringrose, “@Notofeminism, #Feministsareugly, and Misandry Memes.”


53. Ibid, 21.

54. Blackman, “Affective politics, debility and hearing voices.”


57. Ibid, 102.


60. m1nd--0ver—matter, “You like your girls insane,” Tumblr post, accessed June 22, 2022, https://m1nd%2D%2D0ver%2D%2D0matter.tumblr.com/post/120501681047.


63. Holowka, “Between artifice and emotion: the “sad girls” of Instagram.”

64. Gonzalez and Wollen, “In Conversation with Mira Gonzalez;” Watson, “How girls are finding empowerment through being sad online.”

65. Wells, “Audrey Wollen’s Feminist Instagram World.”


68. Ibid.


71. Wells, “Audrey Wollen’s Feminist Instagram World.”


73. Alderton, The aesthetics of self-harm, 100.


75. Ibid.

76. Wollen in Eler, “Panel This is What Feminism 4.0 Looks Like.”

77. Ibid.

78. Jones, “Remembering Instagram Before the Influencers.”

79. Ibid.


81. 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.

82. Calderón-Douglass, “Sad Girls y Qué Are Breaking Down Machismo with Internet Art.”


84. Calderón-Douglass, “Sad Girls y Qué Are Breaking Down Machismo with Internet Art.”


88. Ibid, 184, 190.
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90. In 2019 Instagram started experimenting with removing the total number of likes from a post, for a while users in several countries could no longer display how many likes singular posts received. At the time of writing, however, users can choose to either show or hide the exact number of likes a particular post has received; Leventhal, “How removing ‘likes’ from Instagram could affect our mental health.”
92. Marwick, “Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy.”
95. Robertson, “Inside Patreon, the economic engine of internet culture.”
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98. Young, “How to increase serotonin in the human brain without drugs.”
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104. Haley Byam (@ghosted1996), “An old hardcore mood,” Instagram post, https://www.instagram.com/p/BUq1z_1FVi9/, the post is no longer available at this link because Haley’s account was suspended by Instagram and since late 2021 she has a new one under the slightly different username @ghosted_1996, see note 102.

105. Ibid.

106. Haley Byam (@ghosted1996), “Um this had a typo so reposting lol I hate myself but Raise your hand if mental healthcare/pharma has actually drastically worsened your illness but you’re still dependent on it,” Instagram post, https://www.instagram.com/p/BVvCOzolI5i/, just as with the post referenced in note 102, this post is no longer available.


110. Lawrence and Ringrose, “@Notofeminism, #Feministsareugly, and Misandry Memes,” 218.

111. Ibid, 218.


113. Ibid, 4.


117. Ibid, 218.


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124. Fox in Jacoby, “How Instagram’s ‘Sad Girls Club’ Is Busting the Stigma Around Mental Illness.”


127. Blackman, “Affective politics, debility and hearing voices.”


131. Mediakix.com, “How two friends created @mytherapistsays, a 2.4+ million follower Instagram meme empire,” Blog post, last accessed March 27, 2020, website is no longer available.
132. Lorenz, “Michael Bloomberg’s Campaign Suddenly Drops Memes Everywhere.”
133. Kanai, “Girlfriendship and sameness;” Kanai, “The best friend, the boyfriend, other girls, hot guys, and creeps;” Kanai, Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture; Kanai, “On not taking the self seriously.”
137. Gill and Kanai, “Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism.”
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139. At one point in my research, the My Therapist Says website contained extensive information for potential advertisers. Including a “press” heading that featured links to several articles about the account, an “advertise”-section where companies could 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.” The website also featured an 8-page media kit that outlined the case for working with the My Therapist Says brand, detailing their demographic and their resume of brand partners. These pages are no longer available on their website, which at the time of writing only contains some basic information about Tash and Argiris and a webshop. “My Therapist is … rebranding,” website, accessed June 27, 2022, https://mytherapistsays.ca/.
140. Institute for Precarious Consciousness, “WE ARE ALL VERY ANXIOUS.”
141. Ibid.
142. Ibid.
143. Haley Byam (@ghosted1996), “An old hardcore mood,” Instagram post, https://www.instagram.com/p/BUq1z_1FVi9/, the post is no longer available at this link because Haley’s account was suspended by Instagram and since late 2021 she has a new one under the slightly different username @ghosted_1996; Haley Byam (@ghosted1996), “Um this had a typo so reposting lol I hate myself but Raise your hand if mental healthcare/pharma has actually drastically worsened your illness but you’re still dependent on it,” Instagram post, https://www.instagram.com/p/ BVvCOzolI5i/, just as with the other post, this post is no longer available.
144. Haley Byam (@ghosted1996), “Anyone tried nuva ring for PMDD? Drop ur experiences in the comments below,” Instagram post, just as with the Byam’s other posts, this has since been deleted, https://www.instagram.com/p/BmJ42ghFyYI/.
Institute for Precarious Consciousness, “WE ARE ALL VERY ANXIOUS.”

Ibid.


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