



Melancholic Melodies

Gender and Sadness in The 'Sad Girl Indie' Genre



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ABSTRACT

The melancholic subject is a character within the ‘sad girl indie’ genre that has risen to popularity over the last decade, largely due to the infamous *Spotify* playlist called “Sad Girl Starter Pack”, which featured songs that characterized one’s music taste as yearning. With over a million saves, young girls around the world have found solace in the sad lyrics in the comfort of their bedrooms. This type of emotional music became so popular that it evolved into its own genre name: Sad Girl Indie. This thesis offers an analysis of the ‘sad girl indie’ genre, considered a subgenre within the vague bounds of indie music. Therefore, it is difficult to clearly define what falls under this term, as it is more defined by emotional expression than by specific musical characteristics. The thesis explores the historical implications of the pathologizing of the female psyche and how this is represented in the arts, especially within the music scene. It questions how the tortured artist is revered and desired by the music industry and society as a whole. This stereotype, and the genre, is characterized by vulnerability and melancholy. This can become problematic if this image becomes romanticized by the public, especially in the context of rising parasocial fan culture over the last decade. The thesis provides a methodological framework that combines lyrical analysis of the songs most represented in the genre with a discourse analysis of interviews with relevant artists. These findings are analyzed with a theoretical framework of Sigmund Freud on the melancholic subject and Theodor Adorno on the commodification of popular music, supported by contemporary literature on sad girl culture. Therefore, this thesis aims to uncover how the melancholic subject is represented and romanticized in the ‘sad girl indie’ genre by reinforcing feminine stereotypes based on historical views of the female psyche.

Keywords: Commodification, Community, Femininity, Melancholy, Sad Girl Culture

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INTRODUCTION

People turn to music for various reasons, to find comfort or to dance. Some might focus on the music and others on the lyrics. Music, as an age-old art form, accompanies us throughout our lives. We have our favorite songs that we hold closely to our hearts. This is especially relevant in the ‘sad girl indie’ genre that contains songs of great emotional depth. As can be heard in Lorde’s “Sober II (Melodrama)”: “Our only wish is melodrama” (0:42-0:46), fans of the genre wish to recognize the sadness and darkness they must face in their own lives. This thesis focuses on the artists who make music within the ‘sad girl indie’ genre. The genre has gained popularity over the last few years, mainly through artists such as Phoebe Bridgers and Lana Del Rey. They have faced criticism for the kind of music they make, as it often bears marks of depression and melancholy. This can be seen as problematic, since listeners often recognize themselves in these songs; however, it also offers a place of comfort. For example, Lucy Dacus, an artist credited within this genre, wrote in a tweet:

sadness can be meaningful but I got a bone to pick with the “sad girl indie” genre, not the music that gets labeled as that, but the classification and commodification and perpetual expectation of women’s pain, also i don’t think my songs are sad, anyways good morning. (Dacus qtd. Cruz)

This quote shows how the genre is perpetuating the history of prejudices about women’s melancholia in music and how people are profiting off the pain of women while simultaneously not taking their art seriously. Emotional music that dominates this genre has often faced sexism from critics. This thesis explores the othering of women in the world of indie music and how that shows the position of indie women in the music industry. The genre is characterized by its emotional and confessional storytelling; therefore, it often portrays themes of mental health in the songs. To discover more about this phenomenon, the study

explores the careers of artists in the genre by analyzing how they are situated in the music industry and how they are perceived by the general public and music critics alike.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The indie genre, similar to the alternative genre, was primarily composed of artists who were not with a major label and did not enter the mainstream charts; however, in the last decade, there has been a rise in popularity regarding artists that compose this genre. For example, artists such as Lorde and Billie Eilish, who make ‘sad girl’ music, have entered the mainstream music charts. Therefore, it has not been extensively studied as of yet. This is particularly true for the emerging subgenre called 'sad girl indie' that remains academically unexplored. Moreover, since it is a recent phenomenon, most research that is available has been published within the last decade. Most sources that can be found in this research area are online articles or bachelor's theses that are not adequately peer reviewed. These sources will be used to show the recent academic interest in this topic; however, they will not be used further in the results of this study. This thesis examines the position of the 'sad girl indie' genre within the broader music landscape by researching relevant scholarship on indie music as a whole and by looking into the historical perception of female sadness. By analyzing their arguments, this thesis provides a deeper understanding of the 'sad girl indie' genre regarding gender, musical identity, and its cultural reception by the general public and the music industry. Before that, one must uncover what research has already been done on the topic.

First, “Private words, public emotions” written in 2018 by Ariana Phillips-Hutton, analyzes how confessional performances in music are constructed in this genre and how both the artist and the audience participate in this process. Phillips-Hutton explains how the genre is constructed using the concept of confessional music. She explores the history of indie music and how it formed a deeper relationship between the singer-songwriter and its audience

due to the element of authenticity. The album *The Sparrow and The Crow* by William Fitzsimmons is used as a case study in this article. Therefore, this article does not add to the discourse of the position of women in the indie music scene; however, it does provide historical context of the indie confessional genre and how it cultivates an authentic and emotionally charged connection with listeners. It argues that it has a therapeutic element in which listeners can relate to their own struggles. Nicola Dibben utilizes similar arguments, however, contextualizes them with how femininity is positioned in the music industry.

Dibben will provide an insight into how femininity is constructed in popular music in her article “Representations of Femininity in Popular Music” from 1999. She argues that popular music is crucial in shaping gender identity by reinforcing patriarchal norms within the music industry. The article is rooted in cultural studies as it draws upon Marxist cultural theory, Theodor Adorno’s critique of mass culture, and Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of semiotics. The premise of the arguments made in the article is that “social identities are not fixed but are constructions forged through 'cultural work'” (Dibben 331). Dibben analyzes three songs in her article that reveal how ideology is structured in music, and by doing so, into the listener (341). The article analyzes the commodity character of music and how patriarchal ideologies of femininity are represented, and it criticizes the ability to resist the patriarchy due to the commercial nature of popular music. The theory discussed in this article will be essential to analyze the cultural context of the music within the indie genre and serves as an example for this thesis’ methodology.

To discover more about the identity of the 'sad girl' artist, the 2023 article “Melody and Melancholia: Phoebe Bridgers and The Grieving White Woman” by Serena Deng builds upon Dibben’s arguments as it speaks of identity politics through cultural processes regarding the ‘white grieving woman’ in music. She does this by referencing Sigmund Freud’s work on melancholy. It analyzes how race plays into this phenomenon, as the sad girl indie artist is

usually a white woman. Melancholy in white women almost becomes something desirable, as it paints them as objects of desire that emphasize melancholy as an aspect of femininity to be attractive and sellable (Dibben qtd. in Deng 16). It questions how “individuals cope when their mourning becomes a sought-after commodity” (Deng 15). The article exemplifies the appeal of the genre as explained by Leslie Jamison: “Listening felt so bad and so good ... Those songs gave me scars to try on like costumes . . . I wanted to be killed and resurrected.” (qtd. in Deng 16). The article grounds itself in an interview with Phoebe Bridgers by Lyn Hirschberg and connects it to the literature about melancholy by Sigmund Freud to contextualize the role of emotion in the genre. It offers an intersectional feminist approach to the issues within the genre.

To understand the element of sadness in the genre, *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture* (2023) by Fredrika Thelandersson provides an in-depth analysis of the role of the melancholic woman in contemporary culture. The study examines the shift in Western media culture from an overwhelmingly positive portrayal of life in the mid-2010s to one that focuses on sadness, mental illness, and trauma—particularly in relation to female mental health. She analyzes the rise of ‘sad girl culture’ and how celebrities have opened up about their experiences with mental health. The general argument made by Thelandersson in her book is that mental illness has played a significant role in the creation of ‘sad girl culture’ and how music in this genre uses sadness in music marketing. Especially how social media has influenced the emergence of the ‘sad girl culture’ we know today. More specifically, Thelandersson argues that contemporary portrayals of sadness still reinforce gendered expectations of women. She writes, “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” (169). In this passage, Thelandersson is suggesting that women’s mental health, which historically has been

pathologized, is commercialized and seen as a driving force for creativity. In conclusion, Thelandersson's belief is that contemporary portrayals of sadness still reinforce gendered expectations of women through glorifying mental illness for commercialization.

In the view of Jessica A. Holmes, Thelandersson is right, because she argues how the misdiagnoses of hysteria in the arts still are prevalent today in her article from 2023 called "Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing". More specifically, Holmes believes that mental health in music can serve as a place of comfort and representation; however, she calls out how the music can romanticize mental illness. For example, in the case of Billie Eilish, she introduced themes of depression with her songs into mainstream music. Although Thelandersson is more critical about the uses of emotion in commercial music, Holmes maintains that it can also be a place of comfort. Therefore, Holmes concludes that even though historically 'madness' or mental health has often been revered as a marker of authenticity, it is also connected to the stigmatization of women musicians rooted in the feminization of hysteria.

Matthew Sachs, Antonio Damasio, and Assal Habibi contributed to the discourse of sad music by researching why mental pain is often sought after in music, and why humans find this music pleasurable in their 2015 article, "The pleasures of sad music: a systematic review". It touches upon the listener's experience and their connection to music rather than the intentions of the artists who create sad music, which was more prevalent in the previously discussed literature. They take a philosophical and psychological approach to uncover the paradox of humans finding pleasure in sad music despite its negative connotations. Sachs et al argue that sadness can be found pleasurable in the arts, especially music, as the immediate social and physical circumstances are not present (9). Moreover, sad music often deals with self-expression, social connectedness, and existential meaning, which people often find more beautiful than songs about joy and happiness. The article, thus, shows how sad music is

encouraged by the public as it fulfills their melancholic needs, which can provide the listener with pleasure.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

There is a certain expectation for sad music within the music industry, which focuses on emotional expression and femininity. This study will investigate how artists who create sad music are perceived through historical perceptions of female sadness. By taking the views about femininity in music and sad girl culture of the authors discussed in the literature review as my starting point, the following research question will be addressed in this thesis: How does the gendering of the 21st-century 'sad girl indie' genre reinforce societal expectations of female emotion compared to the historical representation of female melancholy in indie music as exemplified by the artistry and reception of the careers of American 'sad girl indie' artists?

To find an answer to this question, the thesis will first try to answer the following sub-questions. The first chapter will provide a historical context that led to the creation of the 'sad girl indie genre' and analyze the uses of melancholy and hysteria in music to answer the sub-research question: How are themes of female melancholy and sadness represented in the 'sad girl indie' genre? The second chapter provides a lyrical analysis of relevant songs within the genre by Phoebe Bridgers, Lana Del Rey, and Lizzy McAlpine to explore how they represent female melancholy and gender in their artistry. It will do so by answering the question: In what ways are female sadness and melancholy constructed in the lyrics of songs categorized within the 'sad girl indie' genre? The third chapter will show how this genre has become a commodity and how this genre genders artists in the 'sad girl indie' genre. It will broaden the range of artists discussed in the previous chapter to best paint a picture of the online discourse of the genre. Therefore, it will center around Lucy Dacus, Lana del Rey, Lorde, Mitski, and

Phoebe Bridgers, but will forgo Lizzy McAlpine due to the lack of relevant interviews online regarding the problematization of the genre. It will position these artists in the larger scheme of the music industry and how these female artists are represented and perceived by the public. It will do so by answering the following question: How do 'sad girl indie' artists perceive their role in the commodification of the 'sad girl indie' persona by the music industry in interviews?

I predict the results of the research will show an insight into the music industry on how women in the indie genre are positioned. By investigating the history of hysteria and melancholy placed on women in the music industry, it will show how these thought processes based on sexism still exist today in the current music industry. Thus, a conclusion could be that the term has problematic connotations that lead to inequality of women in the music industry and reinforce women's stereotypes.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The importance of this research is that within the music industry, female artists have often been overlooked, especially regarding women in indie and indie rock. This research will explore the intersections between women and emotion in music on confessional storytelling. By investigating this, I hope to contribute to cultural and feminist studies, as understanding these dynamics will lead to a better understanding of the position of women in the indie music industry. Possibly to understand how the music industry can break through these stereotypes that limit the creativity of the artists in question, and pave the way to a better understanding of the female experience within the music industry.

DEMARICATION

In this research, I want to address the position of women in the music industry. The focus will be on music made within the indie genre, which is inherently vague as it is often used as an

additive within another genre. For example, indie music tends to be classified as indie rock or indie folk, which are often associated with artists working in the 'sad girl indie' genre.

Therefore, the thesis will start by exploring how this genre is constructed. Then, I aim to analyze the careers and music of three artists and how their artistry is perceived by the public and critics. The three artists discussed in the second chapter are all American artists of the last two decades who are currently topping the 'sad girl indie' playlists; however, they also all offer a new and relevant perspective on the inner workings of the genre. First, Phoebe Bridgers is an American singer-songwriter that makes indie folk music and is notable for her melancholic lyrical themes in her songs, making her emblematic of the sad indie genre. She is known as an indie darling who adheres to the 'sad' aesthetic and is therefore central to the genre. This case study will analyze how this could be considered problematic by romanticizing mental illness by trivializing it through humor. Secondly, the American artist Lana Del Rey, with whom the genre originated and bridged the gap between indie and mainstream pop. According to Thelandersson, Del Rey did not invent the sad girl genre; however, she was instrumental in popularizing it in the 21st-century contemporary media to express a modern-day sadness. Therefore, she is essential to discuss in this study. Her album *Born to Die* was heavily criticized as it came out during a time that pop was dominated by self-empowering feminism (Thelandersson 10). Del Rey will be prominently discussed throughout the study as she could be considered the first 'sad girl' in the current music industry, who continued the tradition of singer-songwriters of the 70s. Lastly, the American singer-songwriter, Lizzy McAlpine, serves as a great example of the type of storytelling that is essential in writing sad indie music. Therefore, she will mainly be used in the second chapter to illustrate the writing style within 'sad girl indie' music. McAlpine is the most recent artist who broke through within this genre compared to the other artists discussed. So, she will be compared to Del Rey and Phoebe to uncover how the position of the sad girl artist

could have changed. These artists will be central in this study, as they all are American 'sad girl indie' artists of the last two decades, topping the playlists within the genre; however, the study will call upon more artists in this genre if deemed necessary to provide context to the theory discussed.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The study will incorporate theories from music studies, feminist studies, and gender studies to better understand the position of women in the indie genre. First, we must define the term indie in music. Indie is an abbreviation of "independent", and it is mostly used for music and film to indicate that the project was made without a major record or film company. However, the term is also used to connote a certain aesthetic. The concept of cultural capital by Pierre Bourdieu suggests that indie music gains value through exclusivity and specialized knowledge. Cultural capital is "a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts" (Johnson qtd. in Hibbitt 56). Indie as a genre then serves as a tool for social differentiation. In his article, "What is Indie," Ryan Hibbitt critiques the elaborate categorization in music, especially regarding indie, as it is a fluid genre that is difficult to define and usually exists as the "other" opposed to a more mainstream genre (58). Therefore, it can be said that indie music does not have clear musical characteristics. "Sad girl indie" is, then, a subgenre that is familiar to alternative rock and indie pop with a female singer who is vulnerable in their lyrics, which often feature themes of mental health and heartbreak, and is accompanied by melodramatic instrumentation. It uses musical songwriting techniques, such as confessional music. The enjoyment of confessional indie music exists in the ability to recognize oneself in the persona described in the music. The term "sad girl indie" can be considered problematic as, according to Annie Parnell in her analyses of the genre, it "occupies a complicated gendered space in

contemporary culture” (qtd. in Cruz). Furthermore, it is interesting to note the use of the word ‘girl’ instead of ‘woman’ to simplify the seriousness of the genre. Cruz argues how the genre is an archetype of the romanticized tortured artist, which has led to negative connotations regarding ‘sad girl indie.’ Philipps-Hutton explained why this is seen as problematic, since listeners often recognize themselves in these songs. Fredrika Thelandersson elaborates on this genre by analyzing the cultural phenomenon of the ‘sad girl culture.’ According to her, the subject of this culture, the ‘sad girl,’ can be described as “a young woman who is unashamed of her emotional life and who fearlessly acts out her pain for others to see” (157). This culture is deeply tied to social media, such as Tumblr and later Instagram, where the aesthetics of melancholia became widespread with teen angst and nostalgic themes. The “sad girl aesthetic” aligns with themes of melancholia, a historical concept that glorifies feeling bad that serves as a driving force of the archetypical tortured and artistic genius (Thelandersson 169).

Melancholia is an important concept in ‘sad girl indie’ music. It is often connected to creativity. For example, the concept of the tortured artist who is bound by sadness but can consequently express themselves greatly in art. According to Sigmund Freud, the concept refers to a sad and depressed state in which the subject has lost interest in the outside world and lost the capacity to love, which leads to the delusional expectation of punishment (244). Freud compares this phenomenon to mourning in his paper, “Mourning and Melancholia,” by arguing that mourning is a reaction to the loss of a loved object; however, in the case of melancholia, there is an unknown loss (245). The individual is trapped in their own unconsciousness, which reveals the pathological affliction of melancholia. The sadness within melancholia has become a characteristic within the genre, and it could be stated that it even romanticizes the notion. According to Serena Deng, melancholy in music becomes a commodity based on a stereotype in a male-dominated world that exploits melancholic

mental illness, steeped in personal experiences of grief (15). Melancholy has become a product of societal and capitalist forces in which the artist in question becomes the subject and object of grief and, by doing so, erases the identity of the artist.

To substantiate Deng's arguments, Theodor Adorno's theory of mass culture will be of use to analyze how melancholy has become a commodity. In his 1932 paper called "On the Social Situation of Music," he argues that popular music has become a commodity, creating its value exclusively through its market value. According to Adorno, music is shaped by the social and historical context of its time, which leads to a lack of artistic expression. He makes a distinction between popular and serious music, in which popular music is complicit with consumerism. This notion is similar to the concept of high and low art, which is also relevant to the distinction between mainstream and indie music. He continues to talk about this notion in his 1941 paper called "On Popular Music," in which he states that popular music has become standardized. The standardization has led to pseudo-individualism, which means "endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself" (Adorno, "On Popular Music" 203). Thus, giving the listener free choice in the music market, however, all music sounds similar to what they have heard before. Additionally, he argues there are different kinds of listeners, the obedient type and the emotional type. The obedient type focuses their listening on rhythm and naturally moves towards dance music and pop, whereas the emotional type focuses more on the lyrics and will likely listen more to folk or rock music as it contains more lyrical depth (Adorno, "On Popular Music" 207-208). Wish fulfillment is a guiding principle in the listener behavior of the emotional type.

In terms of methodology, I will conduct a lyrical analysis of prominent songs within the genre, complemented with a discourse analysis of interviews and blogs written about the careers of 'sad girl indie' artists, to discover how the image of the sad girl indie artist is

constructed and perceived. The first chapter investigates the historical and cultural impact of women, which led to the creation of the melancholic genre and the sad girl culture. These findings will provide a better understanding of the uses of emotion in the 'sad girl indie' genre. The second chapter will build upon these findings to uncover how artists utilize these musical conventions in their music by performing a lyrical analysis. The analysis will be based on the method used by Nicola Dibben, who aimed to understand how gendered subjectivity is constructed through the particular representational system of music by analyzing the lyrics through theory on femininity and ideology. She analyses the lyrics of the song and describes how it correlates with its musical characteristics, such as the structure, pitch, and rhythm. She analyses the song as if telling a narrative accompanied by music, which this study will do as well. The narrative will be analyzed by the theory discussed in the first chapter about the role of melancholy in music in the context of contemporary sad girl culture. Therefore, not looking at the lyrics like poems, but as an integral part of the song, contextualized by theory on sadness in music. The final chapter will contextualize earlier findings with a discourse analysis of interviews and blogs about the 'sad girl indie' genre. It will conclude how the genre works within the larger music industry by investigating the reception of 'sad girl' music by critics and fans in reviews, interviews, and online fan behavior. The analysis will focus on quotes by artists situated within the genre who were outspoken about being part of the genre and the effect on their identity and their artistry. The interviews used in the study were chosen due to their relevance to this thesis regarding the nature of the genre. The female experience of these artists is established through the historical connotations of women experiencing melancholy; therefore, this thesis will begin by diving into the historical and cultural background that led to the rise of sad girl culture.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SADNESS IN MUSIC

Women have often been underappreciated in the arts, dismissed or pathologized as 'mad' when expressing emotions or challenging societal norms of the time. This chapter delves into the emotional landscape of music and examines why creative women have been pathologized as mentally unstable throughout history by tracing a line from the nineteenth-century image of the hysterical woman to the 21st-century 'sad girl'. Thelandersson draws this line in her book *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health*, exploring how women are perceived regarding mental health in society. The songs central in 'sad girl indie' music—a genre filled with themes of depression, anxiety, and emotional vulnerability—resemble diary entries for the world to see and possibly relate to. The melancholic state of sadness in these songs seems never-ending and without cause. As Phoebe Bridgers sings in “Funeral,” “Jesus Christ, I’m so blue all the time” (1:21-1:27), showing themes of depression. The music by artists situated in this genre contains overwhelming emotions, inviting the listener to find comfort and connection in their shared melancholy. So, what exactly makes a sad song ‘sad’ that people resonate with it? This chapter will try to investigate how the genre is historically and culturally constructed by answering the following sub-question: How are themes of female melancholy and sadness represented in the ‘sad girl’ genre? To do so, I will first discuss the history of mental illness in women to understand the perceptions of sadness in women to the rise of the sad girl figure in contemporary internet discourse. Then, analyze the musical characteristics represented in this genre on how they portray melancholy and sadness in music, to conclude how the “sad girl indie” genre is constructed. To fully understand the phenomenon of the sad girl, one must look back to the 19th century, when female emotions were pathologized as mad.

HISTORICAL PERCEPTION OF FEMALE MELANCHOLY

The ‘Victorian madwoman’, the ‘hysteric’, the ‘schizophrenic’ or the ‘Prozac-consuming American Woman’ of the 1990s were often used to describe the mental state of women (Thelandersson 9). These mental disorders might have been better explained by modern medicine; however, in their respective time, these women were pathologized as mad. These historical perceptions still influence how we view mental illness today. Mental health has always and still is a gendered science, causing misunderstandings of the female mind. This all started in the early 18th century with the dawn of the Enlightenment, where the ideas of human sciences were introduced in a world based on religion (Thelandersson 34). Fredrika Thelandersson calls upon the theory of Michel Foucault, who theorized the change in the juridical system during this epistemological shift that went from torturing criminals to confining and ‘curing’ them. (Thelandersson 34). This led to the rise of psychology and psychiatry. Earlier, the mad had been equal to the brutes and ferocious animals, who were mostly male; however, when an ideological shift took place regarding the “dialectic of reason”, the symbolic gender of the insane shifted from male to female (35). According to Thelandersson, “Reason became synonymous with men and masculinity and unreason with women and femininity” (35), and the male doctor counterpart would be responsible for her care. Thus, the repulsive madman is replaced by the appealing madwoman. The British Canadian writer, Lisa Appignanesi, who is known for her studies on the history of madness, specialized in Freud’s theories, argues that the representation of madness, “was becoming feminized and tamed, no longer wild, raving and dangerous, but pathetic” (43). The image of the madwoman became a prominent topic within society, and started with the craze around hysteria.

When talking about psychoanalysis, it is hard to avoid the writings of Sigmund Freud, who, alongside Josef Breuer, argued that the cause of hysteria was more about the social circumstances than the biological predisposition (Thelandersson 45). The treatment of

hysteria is often considered by feminists as a suppression of female resistance. This led to misdiagnoses of female mental health that caused a state of melancholy in which the one seems to be trapped in an internal feeling of inexplicable loss. Freud defines melancholy as “a state of perpetual, pathological mourning, where the subject loses interest in everything besides mourning” (qtd. in Deng 15). The theory of Freud and Breuer was that it was society that confined these women to a domestic life of boredom, which changed the representation of the madwomen to the wealthy white women who were much more sympathetic and amenable (Thelandersson 46). This image is mainly characterized by a white woman, as in a male-dominated world, they are painted as objects of desire that emphasize feminine pain and weakness (Dibben 334). This view of the white women changed as their social standing changed after the Second World War.

The female hysteria declined after the Second World War as, according to Showalter, “many believed that women had become stronger and less vulnerable to mental breakdown when they were faced with real crisis and when they were given meaningful work” (“Women and Psychiatric Modernism” 195). However, after the Second World War, the mental illness of schizophrenia took the place of hysteria. Symptoms of this order were passivity, depersonalization, disembodiment and fragmentation, which again were seen by feminists as a reflection of women’s social situation of the time and to control women who do not conform (Thelandersson 46). Feminists, like Appignanesi, criticized how women were treated, connecting mental disorders to talented women, giving the example of Sylvia Plath, whose “iconic marriage of great talent, depression and suicide made her into an influential model of one way of being a woman” (8). The 20th-century poet alludes to a well-known trope within the image of the tortured artist, as she was overshadowed by her husband’s work during her lifetime, and her fame only grew after her death. Plath’s work has often been interpreted with themes of societal expectations on women, emphasizing the impact she had

on feminist literature (Bassnet 1). She, then, serves as a great example of the effects of patriarchy on women in the arts. Thus, the over-diagnosing of schizophrenia in the 1960s was used to limit women who aspired to go beyond the contemporary gender conventions (Thelandersson 47). This limited women in achieving success in their art and careers.

It can, thus, be stated that mental disorders, such as hysteria and schizophrenia, are closely related to feminism. Showalter even argues how “for some writers, hysteria has been claimed as the first step on the road to feminism, a specifically feminine pathology that speaks to and against patriarchy” (“Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender” 286). In recent years, there has been an increasing discussion regarding mental health in the media that craves authenticity, which creates a closer connection between artists and their fans. Fans want to see themselves in their heroes, and hearing someone with the same issue leads to more relatability. Thus, in our current society, mental health is valued as a supportive function; however, it has also become marketable, as profitable vulnerability strengthens authenticity between artists and their listeners (Thelandersson 211). This eventually led to the rise of the ‘sad girl’ in the 21st century.

RISE OF SAD CULTURE

Thelandersson argues how the rise of female sad culture is closely connected to women’s magazines and social media such as Tumblr and how they influenced the female psyche. This thesis uses similar arguments to understand how sadness is reflected in music. So, who exactly is the ‘sad girl’ in contemporary society? According to Zoe Alderton, the sad girl is “a young woman who is unashamed of her emotional life and who fearlessly acts out her pain for others to see” (xx). This definition tries to explain how the sad girl on the internet has changed what it means to be ‘sad’. Moreover, Alderton argues that the wave of sad girls online can be considered a form of feminism that defines an online performance that reveals

why young women are sad and how their sadness can be a way to release negative affect and protest wrongdoing rather than wallowing in non-action (95). Social media serves as an online community that provides a space where people can share their feelings, see themselves in others, and therefore feel less alone. Anna Gibbs describes this as ‘affective resonance,’ which is “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” (Tomkins qtd. in Gibbs 3). This leads to the chance that one can internalize how someone else is feeling when reading it online. Social media can thus become an echo chamber of sadness.

The repetition of the sharing of these sad girl imagoes led to the creation of the ‘sad girl aesthetic’ that has been popularized in the last decade through media platforms such as Tumblr, which can be credited as the birthplace of the ‘sad girl’ (Thelandersson 161). According to Alderton, this figure is represented in the fine arts such as music and social media streams perpetuated by ‘iconic sad celebrities’ such as Lana Del Rey, who will be discussed in the following chapter (xxi). One of the affordances of the social media platform is that users do not have to use their real names, which is a common practice on many social media sites. This allows for a sense of anonymity that encourages people to share more openly about their personal experiences and feelings that they might not be comfortable sharing in real life. This can be compared to listening to music in the ‘sad girl indie’ genre, as it allows people to engage with their feelings in a private setting. Through anonymity, they can still find a connection to the artist about what they might be feeling on topics they do not dare to talk to their peers about. Moreover, it might help find other people who feel the same that also relate to the song, without talking explicitly about what they might be feeling. One can therefore internalize and stay sad by falling into this echo chamber of sadness. Wallowing

in sadness can be described as the feeling of melancholy, a core characteristic of 'sad girl indie.

Melancholy is often associated with sadness; however, it also seems to open up the ability for creativity. Ann Cvetkovich explains how melancholy was part of the cultural experience during, for example, the Renaissance and Romanticism that led to a creative force in their times (107). The glorifying of sadness can lead to art and be the driving force of the archetypal tortured genius. Serena Deng, who builds upon the theory of melancholy by Freud in her article, argues how the melancholy of the artist becomes something bigger than themselves as, "When mourning is no longer an internal affair, but something performed for viewers to consume, outward social forces dictate the nature of this mourning more than the individual mourner" (15). The music of 'sad girl indie' artists, thus, becomes part of the cultural sphere. Deng criticizes how this persona of the 'sad girl' is often a white, cis woman and how art has often featured a white woman who has been stereotyped as 'tragic' (Mooney qtd. in Deng 15). This aligns with the persona attached to the hysteric woman of the 19th century. She references the article "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholy" by David Eng and Shinhee Han, which explains how minorities often suffer from melancholy because of the social influences where one can feel a sense of loss when excluded from society (Deng 16). This is an 'unresolved' loss that leads to a melancholic state. This could be a reason why there are many Asian American artists who make 'sad girl indie,' for example, Mitski or Japanese Breakfast. Thus, Eng and Han expand on the idea of Freud's melancholy theory that it's not just an internal, but also a social force that can incite melancholy by deepening the understanding of how race plays into the cultural processes of melancholy that are represented in artistic production (Eng and Han 667). Deng describes the character of the cis white melancholic woman as an object of desire by the male gaze that proposes a desirable femininity. Therefore, the melancholic character is a superior one because she is perceived as

valued when maintaining the melancholic vulnerability (Sontage qtd. in Thelandersson 16). This makes one question why sadness in music is so desired by listeners. Matthew Sachs, Antonio Damasio, and Assal Habibi offer insight into this phenomenon in their article, “The Pleasures of Sad Music: A Systematic Review,” as to why such a negative emotion is so revered in the music industry.

PERFORMING SADNESS IN MUSICAL STORYTELLING

Sadness is one of the basic emotions of humanity, along with fear, happiness, anger, surprise, and disgust (Sachs et al. 1). Emotions in music help listeners connect, as they are a universal experience that resonates with everyone. We might experience feelings of sadness when we lose a beloved or a sentimental object. A loss can also mean the loss of a relationship that is the cause of many heartbreak songs throughout history. So, how does one define sad music? What can make a tune so unbearably sad? According to Sachs et al., sad music can be determined by its acoustic properties and the listener's interpretation of the emotion (2). Musical features of music that are considered sad include: “lower overall pitch, narrow pitch range, slower tempo, use of the minor mode, dull and dark timbres, softer and lower sound levels, legato articulation, and less energetic execution” (Sachs et al. 2). They continue to explain how people classify music as sad based on the emotion that is perceived, which is often determined by directly asking listeners what emotion they feel when listening to music (Sachs, et al. 2). This would mean that the categorization of whether a song is considered sad is in the hands of the listener. Therefore, it would be subjective, as it could differ if people believe a song sounds sad. This gets complicated if we separate the lyrics from the instrumental track.

According to Glenn Schellenberg and Christian Von Scheve, popular music is a “mirror of society” and so reflects people’s needs and preferences (1). In their study, they

analyze how over the years this reflection has become sadder since the 60s by looking at the tempo and mode of a song. These musical features help determine whether a song is perceived as sad by the listener; happy-sounding songs are more often composed in a major key with a fast tempo, while sad-sounding songs typically use a minor mode and a slower tempo (Schellenberg and Von Scheve 1). They found that popular recordings became sadder and emotionally ambiguous with an increasing use of the minor mode as it almost doubled in the last five decades (5). They theorized that a reason for this change could be a rhetorical device where a sad-sounding song is more likely to be taken seriously by the listener and show intelligence and maturity (Schellenberg and Von Scheve 6). Schellenberg and Christian Von Scheve theorized that there has been an increase in sad music since the 60s, additionally that there has been an increase in the use of mixed emotional cues in popular music. This can lead to mixed perceptions by the listener and a song sounding simultaneously sad and happy (Schellenberg and Von Scheve 1). This means a song might 'sound' happy; however, when looking at the lyrics, it could trigger memories that the listener themselves associates with sadness (Sachs et al. 2). This would make them classify a seemingly happy song as sad.

The article by Ariana Phillips-Hutton, "Private Words, Public Emotions: Performing Confession in Indie Music," analyzes how confessional storytelling is constructed in indie music. As was stated before, authenticity and relatability are central to the sad girl indie genre; therefore, confessional storytelling is often used. Phillip-Hutton argues that confession in music has a therapeutic element in which listeners can relate music to their own struggles. David Shumway, who is referenced in Phillip-Hutton's article, traces a connection between confessional poetry and confessional music like Sylvia Plath. This led to the emergence of confessional singer-songwriters in the 60s and 70s, like Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell, when music began taking on a sadder tone (Phillip-Hutton 330). In the 1970s, there was a musical shift from raucous styles of rock with political concerns towards a more intimate and personal

style (Shumway qtd. Phillip-Hutton 334). Confessional music is radically introspective, as songs reflect the life of the artist. This style of writing merged with indie in the subgenre called confessional indie that uses a first-person narrative and a performance of the self. It often carries elements of folk music and the singer-songwriter tradition, which we still see today as ‘sad girl indie’ often takes influences from indie-rock or indie-folk (Phillip-Hutton 331). Furthermore, the performance culture of indie music encourages an aesthetic of self-revelation, which makes confessional storytelling an essential part of songwriting (Phillip-Hutton 330). Confessional indie provides an element of truthfulness, and if the artist breaks with that persona, there is a lack of success. Essentially, the artist and their persona are the same entity based on authenticity, which makes it relatable to the listener. Thus, confessional storytelling in music is a personal and introspective narrative style that is rooted in self-disclosure and emphasizes vulnerability.

THE TRAGEDY PARADOX IN ‘SAD GIRL INDIE’

Music has the ability to evoke emotions in the listener, and sad music is often experienced as something pleasurable (Sachs et al. 1). But it can also provide a place of comfort with themes of grief and sorrow. Adorno theorized about different kinds of listeners, the obedient and the emotional type. The latter can be attributed to the ‘sad girl indie’ genre, as the emotional listener tends to focus more on the lyrics and songs influenced by folk or rock (Adorno 207). These two genres are most connected to ‘sad girl indie’, often featuring songs with an indie-rock or indie-folk influence. These lyrics in sad music often contain ‘wish fulfillment’, which, according to Adorno, is the guiding principle for why sad music speaks to the emotional listener type (Adorno 208). Moreover, the songs featured in the ‘sad girl indie’ genre are often classified with the feeling of yearning, which can be compared to the need for ‘wish fulfillment’. Matthew Sachs and his fellow authors elaborated on his theory by researching why emotional type listeners are pulled towards sad music. They offer a

framework for how listening to sad music can lead to positive feelings. According to them, sadness in music is found pleasurable “(1) when it is perceived as non-threatening; (2) when it is aesthetically pleasing; and (3) when it produces psychological benefits such as mood regulation, and empathic feelings, caused, for example, by recollection of and reflection on past events” (Sachs et al. 1). One can compare this to horror movies, in which the watcher is often ridiculed as to why one would watch something so scary and gory. However, it provides the watcher with a space to watch something dangerous in a safe place that is non-threatening. Therefore, sad music provides a safe way to feel sadness, without being personally involved.

Sadness is generally viewed as a negative emotion that serves as a response to a negative experience; however, sadness in an aesthetic context can contain an element of pleasure (Sachs et al. 1). This is called the “tragedy paradox,” which is, according to Sachs et al., “the idea that humans work to minimize sadness in their lives yet find it pleasurable in an aesthetic context” (2). Throughout history, there has been a popular theme of art with sad content, such as in music, plays, films, or paintings. For example, a wildly popular genre in theatre is tragedy, popularized by the Greeks and later Shakespeare, which is still relevant in today’s culture. Thus, one can state that sadness has always been connected to a form of pleasure throughout history. According to Sachs et al., the first to discuss this paradox were Athenian philosophers who proposed that arts associated with negative emotions provide rewards (2). An example of this can be found in the tragic theater of old Greece, which provided the audience with the possibility to experience and purge itself of negative emotions, which would result in the beneficial reward called catharsis (Sachs et al. 2). Emotivists, a philosophy group who claim that music induces genuine sadness in the listener, believe this can be rewarding because it rewards the listener with an improved understanding of the emotions expressed and provide the listener with an opportunity to learn about one’s

feelings, emotional resolution, and a connection to feelings from the composer to the listener. On the other hand, cognitivists argue that music does not provoke real emotions, but that it can still be perceived in music as a reminder of emotions. Thus, it can then serve as a “tour guide of past emotions” (Sachs et al. 2). This fictional tour guide in music can help a listener process emotions, which, according to the participants of the study by Sachs et al., is more pleasant than recollecting a sad memory (4). Thus, music that conveys sadness can be considered pleasurable, as emotions in art feel ‘safer’ than being confronted with autobiographical memories, which can help individuals to cope with negative emotions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this chapter has explored how melancholy and sadness have long been associated with the female psyche, from the 19th-century hysteria craze to the modern “sad girl” aesthetic, popularized on platforms like Tumblr. Within the music industry, mental health is seen as a profitable vulnerability, with a notable rise in sad-sounding songs since the 1960s. This chapter started by asking: how are themes of female melancholy and sadness represented in the ‘sad girl indie’ genre? These themes are primarily shown through musical elements such as slow tempo, minor modes, and confessional storytelling, which is rooted in folk and singer-songwriter traditions. The genre is fueled by the stereotyping of women established throughout history since the rise of hysteria, which set the tone to how female mental health is perceived by society. Since the 1960s, sad-sounding music has used mixed emotional cues that represent the inner turmoil of a conflicted person who wallows in a melancholic state. Melancholy is often intertwined with creativity, as reflected in the trope of the tortured artist. In the ‘sad girl indie’ genre, music is a place where people can foster emotional relatability and build a sense of community among listeners who share similar feelings. Feminist scholars have argued that the representation of mental illness in art can be considered as socially constructed as a tool to challenge existing power structures. Thus,

while ‘sad girl indie’ music can form as a form of resistance, it also cultivates communities. Moreover, the genre also raises questions about the intersectionality of the representation of women in this genre. The archetype of the melancholic female artist is often portrayed as a white, cisgender woman—a persona shaped through historical notions of the hysterical, mad woman—who is deemed desirable by the male gaze. Thus, through confession and authenticity in music and tying into the historical image of the melancholic madwoman, sad girl’ artists capture the sad emotion in their songwriting.

CHAPTER 2: GENDERED SADNESS IN SONG LYRICS OF SAD INDIE MUSIC

This chapter will analyze how female sadness functions in indie music by analyzing six songs that exist within the bounds of this genre, similar to the methodology of Nicola Dibben, using cultural theory to contextualize how the lyrics convey certain ideologies on melancholy. By doing so, this chapter provides insight into how melancholy in women is represented in song lyrics. Additionally, the music theory by Schellenberg and Von Scheve will be used to analyze what makes the song sound 'sad'. According to them, sad music overall has a slower tempo measured with BPM (Beats Per Minute) and uses a minor mode (Schellenberg and Von Scheve 3). The tempo is considered slow if it has a BPM of 60-80 and fast if it has a BPM above 120. The mode and BPM will be used to determine a song can be classified as sad, before analyzing the lyrics. First, I will look into the artistry of Phoebe Bridgers, as she is deemed emblematic of the 'sad girl indie' genre by critics, mainly due to her breakthrough album, *Punisher* (2020), which established her as an indie darling. I will examine how she is positioned as an appealing white woman within the cultural lineage that connects the figure of the hysteric to the contemporary 'sad girl' archetype. Furthermore, it will be discussed how Bridgers is an example of melancholy in music as described by Serena Deng and Sigmund Freud by analyzing her songs, "Funeral" and "Savior Complex". Next, I will analyze Lana Del Rey to discover how she represents femininity in her music concerning melancholic emotions. During a time of female empowerment, Del Rey performed the aesthetic of a melancholic 1950s traditional woman, which caused controversy at the time. Her sad nature set her apart from other female artists during the early 2010s, which makes her a relevant topic to discuss in this thesis. The analysis will show how this sad femininity is represented in the lyrics of "Dark Paradise" and "Video Games". Finally, Lizzy McAlpine will be an example for the uses of confessional storytelling in the 'sad girl indie' genre by analyzing "Drunk, Running" and "Vortex". Her interpretation of melancholy will be compared to the

writing style of Del Rey and Bridgers. She is a new artist within the genre who made her breakthrough in 2022, which provides insight into how the melancholic artist has changed over the years. The analyses presented in this chapter are an attempt to understand how gendered sadness and melancholy are constructed through the particular representational system of music in the indie subgenre 'sad girl indie'. The songs were meticulously selected by going through the discography of each artist. The analyses were selected based on how strongly they convey melancholy and sadness, using the musical features outlined by Sachs et al. in the first chapter. The results will help to discover and answer the following sub-question: In what ways are female sadness and melancholy constructed in the lyrics of songs categorized within the 'sad girl indie' genre?

“FUNERAL” AND “SAVIOR COMPLEX” BY PHOEBE BRIDGERS

Phoebe Bridgers suffers, according to Serena Deng, from melancholy as described by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud's definition of melancholy, Bridgers is trapped in her unconscious, unable to recover from the feeling of grief that refuses to let her escape from the feeling of melancholia (Deng 15). Her discography is overflowing with her personal experiences of grief and loss. Simultaneously showing signs of depression and the ability to not let things go, which leads her to wallow and stay in a melancholic state. Thus, Bridgers' artistic identity seems to be a clear example of melancholy. This can be seen in the song "Funeral," which is a sober track on her debut album called *Stranger in The Alps*. It has a tempo of 87 BPM and has 4 beats per bar, meaning it has low energy. The song is played in B key in a major mode, which is interesting, as sad songs usually work within a minor mode. However, as Schellenberg and Scheve explain, there has been an increase in songs that use mixed emotional cues since the 1960s. This technique is often used by Bridgers in her discography. However, the song still seems to convey a sad feeling. Therefore, we must look at the lyrics.

She kicks off the song with the title in the first sentence, singing “I’m singin’ at a funeral tomorrow / For a kid a year older than me” (Bridgers, “Funeral” 0:37-0:45). Here she invites the listener to a sad setting of a child’s funeral. She tells the listener about a dream she has: “Where I’m screamin’ underwater / While my friends are all waving from the shore” (Bridgers, “Funeral” 0:59-1:07). This shows how she feels excluded from her friends. She distances herself because of her sadness and how her friends do not understand her. Her mental state becomes clear in the chorus as she clearly states, “Jesus Christ, I’m so blue all the time” (Bridgers, “Funeral” 1:22-1:26), hinting towards her dealing with depression. Often, when people feel sad over the long term and experience symptoms of depression, it will start to feel like it has always felt that way, and create the feeling that it will never leave. The second verse explains her trying to cope with her sadness by asking a friend for help, blacking out in her car, and returning to her childhood home. She then takes the listener back to the funeral by singing, “Wishin’ I was someone else, feeling sorry for myself / When I remember someone’s kid is dead” (Bridgers, “Funeral” 2:25-2:35). This alludes to the feeling of comparing your own sadness to others to rationalize it. This could create the idea that your own feelings are invalid, as someone always has it worse than you. Bridgers ends the song by writing, “And it’s 4 a.m again / and I’m doing nothing, again” (Bridgers, “Funeral” 3:00-3:13). Leaving the listener with the unresolved feeling of never-ending depression without knowing the way out. Bridgers seems to wallow in the feeling of loss and sadness, which makes it a clear example of melancholy, as described by Freud.

Bridgers’ follow-up album, *Punisher*, received much critical acclaim and truly cemented her as a staple in the ‘sad girl indie’ subgenre. The track “Savior Complex” tells a story about a codependent relationship that is fueled by people pleasing and the psychological construct of the savior complex. The song has a somber sound created by the slow strumming of the guitar and the playing of wistful violins. It has a 3/4 tempo of 129 BPM, which is still

considered slow due to its three per bar, and uses a major E key; allowing Bridgers once again to blend mixed emotional cues by combining a rather slow tempo with a happy-sounding key. The lyrics, however, tell a different story. The first verse ends with the line, “I drag you to the shore / Sweating through the sheets / You're gonna drown in your sleep for sure” (Bridgers, “Savior Complex” 0:51-1:05). The theme of drowning could allude to being overwhelmed or having anxieties about the relationship as her partner on the track seems to be unable to express themselves, leading to the hook of the song: “Show me yours, I’ll show you mine” (Bridgers, “Savior Complex” 1:35-1:40), which is a call from Bridgers for intimacy in the relationship. In the second chorus, Bridgers sings, “Baby, you're a vampire / You want blood and I promised” (Bridgers, “Savior Complex” 2:24-2:43), possibly referring to how her partner is draining the life out of her. However, Serena Deng provides another interpretation regarding how women are often stereotyped to bear their pain for the sake of societal pressure. She argues, in her article about Bridgers’ career, how melancholy is perceived by society as attractive and a look that society wants from women, similar to what we saw during the time of hysteria and schizophrenia that kept women complicit. Furthermore, “Savior Complex” by Bridgers provides a case study in which she is self-aware of the demands of her melancholic suffering (16). Deng compares the line to the story of Dracula, where the female counterpart gives herself up to their vampire master who asks for her blood (16). In *Dracula*, femininity means being the ideal Victorian woman (Prescott and Giorgio 487). Thus, in this song, Bridgers compares herself to the ideal woman as presented in *Dracula*, giving herself over to the societal male counterpart, in this instance, Dracula, by giving him her blood. This makes her part of a tradition throughout history, in which “the art of white women as a whole has stereotypically been viewed as ‘tragic’ and ‘forlorn’” (Mooney qtd. in Deng 15). Therefore, white women who work in the creative industries have often fallen victim to the need to present themselves as melancholic, like Sylvia Plath who

was discussed in the previous chapter, which led to the melancholic white sad girl artist who occupy the ‘sad girl indie’ genre.

“DARK PARADISE” AND “VIDEOGAMES” BY LANA DEL REY

Lana Del Rey is known as one of the pioneers of the ‘sad girl indie’ genre that we know today, even though one could say she surpassed the indie subgenre and can be considered a mainstream pop artist. However, she is still relevant to discuss, as she was essential in the creation of the genre. Del Rey’s sad persona set her apart during a time of recession pop that mainly consisted of happy music and positive lyrics to counteract the depressing mood of the time during the economic recession of the early 2000s. As was explained by Thelandersson, the countermovement of sadness and her debut album *Born to Die* (2012), which adhered to an old 1950s Hollywood aesthetic, rose during a time of positivism and self-empowerment feminism (10). This stark contrast led to controversy during that time, as it did not align with the conceptions of femininity during the early 2000s. Del Rey became the image of the sad girl, which according to Dibben sells well in the musical industry because, “as a male-dominated world paints them as objects of desire, women often have to emphasize various aspects of femininity to be attractive—feminine pain and weakness being one—in order to be sellable” (Dibben 334). Therefore, by positioning herself as a sad girl in pain, Del Rey makes herself attractive to the male listener. So, let’s look at what made this album so controversial by analyzing “Dark Paradise” and “Video Games” by Lana Del Rey.

“Dark Paradise” has a BPM of 120 and is produced in a minor C \sharp /D \flat key, which correlates with the theory that songs that aim to be perceived as ‘sad’ often are made in a minor mode with a rather slow tempo, as explained by Schellenberg and Von Scheve.

The narrative found in the lyrics tells a story of the protagonist not being able to let go of a past lover, who has presumably died. The title alludes to the singer being in a state of

depression in which she lingers on to the memories of her past lover, knowing he is gone. The song opens with the line, “All my friends tell me I should move on / I’m lying in the ocean, singin’ your song” (Del Rey, “Dark Paradise” 0:16-0:23). The ocean is usually a sad theme in music, as it often connotes drowning or how one’s tears have amounted to creating an ocean, similar to what we saw in “Savior Complex.” In the case of Del Rey’s song, she continues to talk about the song he used to sing, similar to the melody of *The Little Mermaid*, as if he is a siren for her love. Therefore, she is unable to let him go. The pre-chorus begins with the line, “And there is no remedy for memory, your face is like a melody” (Del Rey, “Dark Paradise” 0:47-0:52), which shows how, like Bridgers, she is unable to let go of the feeling and will forever be in the state of melancholy. She ends the pre-chorus by saying she wishes she were dead too, to join her lover in the afterlife. The hook of the song in the chorus goes: “Every time I close my eyes / It’s like a dark paradise / No one compares to you / I’m scared you won’t be waiting on the other side” (Del Rey, “Dark Paradise” 1:04-1:19). The chorus tells the listener how she feels a bittersweet feeling remembering her past lover, as the memories feel like paradise, but it is tainted dark due to his passing. In the second verse, she continues to tell her friends, “Tell ‘em, ‘When you find true love, it lives on’ / Ah, that’s why I stay here” (Del Rey, “Dark Paradise” 1:40-1:50). This is reminiscence of Freud’s theory of melancholy on how she is trapped in her own unconscious and memories, unable to recover from them. Unlike “Funeral”, however, one can find the cause of her sadness, which is the death of her partner, whereas Bridgers lives in a state of sadness, unable to pinpoint a reason for her state of being. The bridge turns to a slightly darker tone as she sings “There’s no relief, I see you in my sleep” (Del Rey, “Dark Paradise” 2:56-3:00) and “There’s no release, I feel you in my dreams” (Del Rey, “Dark Paradise” 3:04-3:08), giving the impression that she feels haunted by the memories, unable to find an escape. The song ends with the line, “I don’t want

to wake up from this tonight” (Del Rey, “Dark Paradise” 3:47-3:50), letting the listener know she also does not want to let the feeling go.

According to the study by Dibben, femininity is constructed through the particular representational system in music, which can both affirm and critique traditional gender roles (332). In the case of Del Rey, there is a clear example of how she reaffirms her gender role by creating an image of herself that aligns with traditional 1950s ideas of what it means to be a woman. In another track on the album, “Video Games”, which was one of her first hits, Del Rey especially leans into a more traditionally viewed femininity by positioning herself in relation to her man. This becomes apparent with the line in the chorus: “It’s you, it’s you, it’s all for you / Everything I do” (Del Rey, “Video Games” 0:55-0:59). This was in stark contrast in the era of female empowerment and independence as it leaned into the voyeuristic pleasure of the male listener. Del Rey sings in the first verse: “I’m in his favorite sundress, watching me get undressed / Take that body downtown / I say, ‘You the bestest,’ lean in for a big kiss, put his favorite perfume on” (Del Rey, “Video Games” 0:35-0:49), which shows how Del Rey makes herself desirable for the male counterpart. A sundress also connotes the fashionable dress of the 1950s, further establishing herself with the vintage aesthetic. The title of the song and hook, “Go play your video game” (Del Rey 0:50-0:53), alludes to the one-sided nature of the relationship, in which Del Rey watches her partner play video games while dressing up and putting on perfume, wanting more. Just like in “Dark Paradise”, Del Rey refers to heaven, when she is with him, which often signals peace and perfection, which turns into a dark place of heaven, as was discussed in the previous song. The chorus line, “Only worth living if somebody is loving you” (Del Rey, “Video Games” :27-1:36), connotes the constant devotion Del Rey has for her partner, even though the verses allude to the fact that the love is unreciprocated. Even though the song shows the feeling of being in love, it sounds rather melancholic with her wistful singing. The track has a tempo of 122 BPM and is

produced in a minor F#/ Gb key, which makes the song sound sad regardless of the lyrics, alluding to a sadder meaning. Thus, “Video Games” tells a narrative of a sad woman aching for the love of her partner, which reaffirms the idea of a woman being defined by her man, while being perceived as emotionally fragile. Consequently, she received much criticism on how she portrayed femininity, as artists can serve as role models. Del Rey embodies and seems to enjoy female weakness and dependence in her music, which has led to her receiving backlash from the feminist community. This persona that Del Rey communicated on her album *Born to Die* shows how she experiences melancholic pleasure (Thelandersson 132). According to Sachs et al, receiving pleasure from sadness is related to the “tragedy paradox”, as was discussed in the previous chapter, which is the idea that humans find sadness pleasurable in an aesthetic context (2). Therefore, Del Rey utilizes this paradox to create a pleasurable element within her music.

“DRUNK, RUNNING” AND “VORTEX” BY LIZZY MCALPINE

Lizzy McAlpine is an upcoming singer-songwriter who recently gained newfound fame with her hit “Ceilings” on her sophomore album. Her artistry is reminiscent of the singer-songwriter tradition of the 1970s, like Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan. Her style of writing is a great example of the earlier discussed storytelling technique called confessional storytelling, which leans on authenticity and emotionality with autobiographical lyrics in music (Phillips-Hutton 329). Her song “Drunk, Running,” on her 2024 album *Older*, provides a new perspective on the classic heartbreak song. While artists often blame their ex-lover for the failure of a relationship, this song navigates her own failings in a story of emotional turmoil and addiction. She recognizes how she is partly responsible for perpetuating the unhealthy cycle, comparing herself to her ex-partner’s addiction. She longs for a chance to start anew and rectify her mistakes. Thus, she discloses an introspective narrative on the past experiences of her own life. The track can be considered a somber song with a tempo of 63

BPM in a major C key. Therefore, similar to Bridgers, McAlpine makes use of mixed emotional cues. In the lyrics, she writes, “What if it was all my fault? / What if I drove you to it? / I was only honest sometimes / And I think you knew it / Make a person out of memories, they won't live up to it / I'm so sorry I stayed when I shouldn't” (McAlpine, “Drunk Running” 1:10-1:50). This can be read as a confession of by admitting her own faults in the relationship, causing her to be vulnerable in her lyrics. This kind of authentic writing makes it easier for the listener to relate to the song, as it cultivates an authentic, emotionally charged connection with its listeners.

Another song on *Older* where the storytelling technique is prevalent is on the final track called “Vortex”, which has a BPM of 58 and is produced in C major key. Therefore, it is considered a slow song alluding to sadness in combination with the lyrics, but it makes use of mixed emotional cues. The song opens on a similar theme with the line, “I know it’s not my fault / But I can’t say that I’m blameless” (McAlpine, “Vortex” 0:13-0:20), in which she blames herself for how the relationship fell apart. However also finds a way to make amends with herself in the chorus as she sings, “Someday I'll be able to let you go / Someday I'll be kinder to myself” (McAlpine, “Vortex” 1:10-1:33), which differs from the songs discussed by Bridgers and Del Rey as they believed it was impossible to move past the feeling, being forever stuck in a melancholic state. In the third verse, she recalls how she felt lost in the relationship with the song's hook: “I never know where my feet are / We’re spinning out of a vortex” (McAlpine, “Vortex” 1:43-1:51). In the bridge, the song seems to pick up the speed, and McAlpine switches from whispering-singing to sounding angrier and louder as if being fed up with the situation. This could be considered one of the musical rewards in sad music, known as catharsis, as described by Sachs, et al. (2). As the song accelerates, she now clearly expresses how she feels about the relationship with the lines: “And I'm tired of this and the way that it feels / I'm not there anymore, this has never been real / We're just awful together

and awful apart / I don't know what to do anymore" (McAlpine, "Vortex" 2:47-3:05). The song ends with the instruments becoming louder and McAlpine vocalizing along with the melody that shows the feeling she is trying to express, leaving the listener with a feeling of catharsis. Furthermore, in the bridge, she sings, "But it's always an act and it never lasts long / 'Cause I always come back when I need a new song" (McAlpine, "Vortex" 2:38-2:46), she admits to the commercial nature in the writing of sad songs. As was described in the first chapter, one of the aspects of the 'sad girl indie' genre is profitable vulnerability. A common theme in the genre is heartbreak; therefore, a heartbreaking relationship can be considered profitable for an artist working in this genre. Her radical, introspective lyrics provide a reflection on her own life that listeners can relate to as it encourages personal identification with the artist as their subject (Phillip-Huttons 334).

CONCLUSION

The lyrical and musical analyses of the songs by Phoebe Bridgers, Lana Del Rey, and Lizzy McAlpine provide an insight into how musical artists use their writing style to convey emotions to the listener. The findings show how female sadness and melancholy in the 'sad girl indie' genre are constructed, as the songs of these artists center around femininity and sadness. This reaffirms the stereotype of women as emotionally fragile; however, it can also reclaim emotion as a powerful tool of storytelling. Each of these artists offers a distinct portrayal of melancholy in their music, which is shaped by their lyrical strategies, vocal performances, and the emotional narrative that is presented. Bridgers' song "Funeral" exemplifies Freud's concept of melancholia by portraying sadness as a state of grief and loss, while Del Rey's "Dark Paradise" and career show how her sadness is romanticized with a stylized and commodified version of feminine grief that caters to the male gaze. Deng showed how gendered sadness is perceived as something desirable in white female artists by society and how melancholy could serve to perpetuate the pathologizing of female sadness. In

contrast, McAlpine's confessional storytelling provides an introspective narrative on sadness, one that aims towards healing instead of dwelling in melancholy, as is seen with Bridgers and Del Rey. These case studies show how gendered sadness in indie music borders between the line of personal vulnerability, as is made clear in "Drunk, Running" and "Vortex," and commercial viability, as is mostly seen in Del Rey's case study. This questions the authenticity and performativity of musical artists in shaping the 'sad girl' identity. The sad girl aesthetic in indie music, thus, provides an interesting cultural site of female emotion by practicing melancholy, which is expressed by the artists in their music and consumed by their fans.

CHAPTER 3: THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE SAD GIRL INDIE PERSONA

So far, this study can conclude how society perceives melancholy as something attractive in women. According to Deng, this causes an expectation for women to strive to become melancholic, or they even become labelled by the public as sad against their wishes. This leads to a greater distance between their own identity and the character created by the public. This chapter investigates how public identity can differ from their self-perceptions using a close reading of online interviews and blogs following Deng's arguments on Freud's theory of melancholy in music. The artists chosen in this chapter are based on how outspoken they have been in interviews regarding the role of their artistry in the industry; therefore, Lizzy McAlpine will not be mentioned further in this chapter, due to a lack of interviews on this topic. This is most likely because she recently became a figure within the genre, only breaking through around 2022, while Del Rey and Bridgers' careers started early and late 2010s, respectively. The testimonies in this chapter will include artists such as Lucy Dacus, Phoebe Bridgers, Lorde, Lana Del Rey, and Mitski. They are household names within the genre and have spoken against the genre in interviews about its role within the music industry.

The interviews provide insight into the inner workings of the development of 'sad girl indie' about the way it has grown and how it is criticized. To do so, this chapter will delve deeper into how the genre is positioned within the broader context of the music industry by uncovering perceptions by the public and critics to find out how the genre perpetuates the female condition in 'sad music'. This chapter addresses the central question: How do 'sad girl indie' artists perceive their role in the commodification of the 'sad girl indie' persona by the music industry in interviews? In doing so, it aims to discover how the genre becomes a commodity in modern society and how it genders the artists working within it.

COMMODIFICATION OF FEMALE PAIN

As was explained by Freud, mourning and melancholy are closely connected, and the concept becomes especially prevalent in sad girl music as it is used as a driving force to sell their music (243). Therefore, feminine pain in music is commodified by pathologizing the melancholic state of female artists. This idea had been theorized by Adorno, who believed pop music created its value exclusively through its market value since it had been taken over by capitalism in the 20th century (391). Adorno criticizes modern music for its standardization and reinforcing societal conformity, the latter being prevalent in the case of the ‘sad girl’ genre. This theory, however, has been criticized for being too dense and exaggerated without room for exceptions; therefore, Max Paddison interprets his theory through a modern perspective. He argues that Adorno does not differentiate between genres as he sticks to rigid categories, not allowing the possibility for change (Paddison 208-209). However, according to Nicola Dibben, if music opposes these categories by being non-standardized and radical, it can become critical and self-reflective of itself and society (332). Thus, “Music which is critical of its own material is critical of the social situation within which it arises” (Dibben 333). It could be said, due to the emotional heaviness, that ‘sad girl indie’ provides new depth in otherwise standardized popular music and is critical of its social situation. Moreover, by tying it to the indie genre, which is a broad genre that does not contain clear guidelines on how the music is supposed to sound, it provides an opportunity for uniqueness in music. However, it could still be argued how the genre has become commodified as it profits from the pain of women, which reveals a narrative of patriarchal femininity (Dibben 335). Moreover, it can even diminish the severity of the emotion of sadness in a way of selling the feeling.

For example, Mitski talked about this topic in an interview with Beaumont-Thomas called “Mitski, the US’s best young songwriter: ‘I’m a black hole where people dump their

feelings”, where she spoke against the commodification in the genre, saying how “At the end of the day, I’m a woman in public, allowing myself to be consumed. I put out songs, but really what people are buying is the product that is me” (Mitski qtd. in Beaumont-Thomas). According to Deng, the ontology of sadness in sad indie artists has become a product of societal and capitalistic forces, which puts artists in a ‘melancholic box’ where they are being forced to produce sad songs about loss (17). Therefore, the genre can become identity-defining in her process, and it can become a risk to their career if they step out of the ‘melancholic box’. Moreover, it stands the risk of becoming standardized music, as described by Adorno.

The 2023 article, “The Plight of Sad Girl Indie”, by Elisabeth Oster elaborates on this issue, by calling the ‘sad girl indie’ label a gendered box that “becomes a trap to ensnare, devoid of creative expansion” (Oster). In the song “The Shell” by Lucy Dacus - a song about creative burnout – she sings the line “You don’t have to be sad to make something worth hearing” (Dacus 0:54-1:02), alluding to the need to be sad to make good music. An idea that is so central to the sad girl genre that artists who have been tied to this genre often feel stuck in the bounds of sad music. The article by Rayne Fisher-Quann called “Lucy Dacus is Not Your Sadgirl” interviews Lucy Dacus, who has been outspoken about the commercial nature of the genre as it profits from women’s pain. In the interview, Dacus expressed:

Just because something is emotionally evocative—just because you’re feeling *something*—that doesn’t mean that you’re crying, or that you’re sad. And so many women, white women particularly, get lumped into this category, when we all have different music and different goals. (Dacus qtd. in Fisher-Quann)

Dacus is an artist to which the public decided was a sad girl artist, even though she has been adamant about the fact that her songs are not necessarily sad, however because they are

emotional, artists are quickly put into the same genre that could possibly limit the creativity of their art, as was expressed in “The Shell”. In *New York Times Magazine*, David Marchese interviewed Bridgers in which she mentioned this very topic, to which she responded with “The whole narrative around catharsis is complex. Sometimes it can put you in a box, where you feel like you can’t write anything but heartfelt songs that offer an emotional release” (Bridgers qtd. in Marchese). She expresses the feeling of being stuck within a genre to create the reward of catharsis in sad music, as explained by Sachs et al. He argued how this beneficial outcome originated in Greek theatre, in which the art served to purge the public of negative emotions (Sachs, et al 2). Therefore, it seems that without these elements of sadness, their music would not be accepted by the public. A fitting example of this is Lorde's record *Solar Power*. She quickly rose to fame with her 2013 album *Pure Heroine* and established herself as a somber indie artist with her groundbreaking 2017 album *Melodrama*. However, after releasing these introspective albums, she released a more upbeat album in 2021 called *Solar Power*. This emotional shift in her sound caused a rift in her fanbase, with loyal fans supporting her while many others harshly criticized the change. Franny Mestrich, in her article in the *kitsch connoisseur*, explained how Lorde, known as the ‘Sad Girl icon,’ was abandoned by her fans when she released her new record, which was deemed a “peppy, poppy” album, and claimed that her fans disliked it and thus lost interest in her. Therefore, based on the reaction Lorde received to her new project, it can be said that when sad girl indie artists decide to move outside the ‘melancholic box,’ the public generally shuns them from the charts. Thus, Lorde’s departure from her melancholic sound highlights the rigid expectations placed on artists within the ‘sad girl indie’ genre.

THE MISINTERPRETATION OF EMOTION

The risk of commodification can cause a misunderstanding of the artist’s intentions and their work. Female artists’ expressions of mental health have often been misread by critics,

reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Since 2019, discussions of depression have become more accepted in mainstream media compared to the cultural climate a decade earlier, reflecting broader social trends (Horner qtd. in Thelanderson 134). Del Rey discussed in a MOJO interview by Victoria Segal how the discourse on depression has evolved over the years. Moreover, Thelandersson argues that Del Rey contributed to the social shift toward greater acceptance of sadness in popular culture (134). However, this was not without backlash. The new generation of ‘sad girl’ music opposes the emotional repression of the 2010s, as Del Rey described in her 2014 interview. Self-empowerment dominated pop music at that time; therefore, when Del Rey released her controversial single “Born to Die,” which highlighted self-destructive behavior, it starkly contrasted with the expectations for women during the 2010s (Thelandersson 10). Thus, during this period, the sad girl aesthetic challenged how women were perceived by the public, who tended to ignore mental health discussions.

In 2014, Lana Del Rey was interviewed by Tim Zone in *The Guardian*, in which she talked about her mental health. However, the interviewer painted her as a melancholic woman with death wishes, clearly showing his judgment. She reflected on this article in *MOJO* almost ten years later. In this interview, she said,

I didn’t say I wanted to die because of the 27 Club – I said I was having, like, a fucking hard time. The way people talk about mental health in 2020” – she makes the noise of an explosion – “mind blown. Talk about a different world compared with five years ago. You said anything remotely like you’re not feeling so good that day and it’s like, ‘Woah, you’ve set women back like 200 years.’ Or ‘Witch!’ It was super-hard to be a real person’. (Del Rey qtd. in Segal)

This aligns with what was discussed in the previous chapter, on how Del Rey’s traditional 50s aesthetic was viewed as anti-feminist and caused her to receive much criticism as she was

viewed as a role model to her listeners. She expresses how she was not allowed to talk about her emotions in the interview, and her having a hard time was misinterpreted as suicidal ideation, which reflects broader issues around women's emotional expression. The story changed in 2023, when the second interview took place, as there is a larger focus on mental health. This was also discussed in the first chapter, as the discourse on mental health has changed over the years that came from the pathologizing of females' mental health to romanticizing it. Del Rey's career started in a time when women were expected to be empowered, not showing any weakness, so they would be able to keep up in a man's world. Del Rey resisted this post-feminist narrative by openly talking about her sadness in interviews and on social media, which was met with criticism.

According to Thelandersson, there has been a shift towards a sadder sound in music due to more open conversations about mental health and illness in the general public. This trend was also researched by Schellenberg and Von Scheve, as discussed in the first chapter, who argued that music has become sadder and emotionally ambiguous since the 1960s, exhibiting a level of sophistication and performers' seriousness in music (6). This is most likely due to a complex interplay between social and cultural change in combination with the emotional needs of its listeners and the marketing strategies of the music industry, which respond to social changes, especially regarding the rise of online networks and streaming services (Schellenberg and Von Scheve 7). It could be stated that the rise of sad girl culture through internet platforms like Tumblr led to a higher demand for sad music in the music industry. Therefore, culture is shaped by the emotional needs of the individual.

The misinterpretation of emotion can also be caused by a lack of understanding regarding artists' cultural backgrounds. Eng and Han's 2015 article provides a theoretical perspective based on Freud's theory on how melancholy is racialized through unresolved grief regarding the Asian American experience, which can be applied to the case study of the

Asian American artist, Mitski. According to Freud, melancholy comes into being when one is dealing with unresolved grief, and in the case of racial melancholia, the unresolved grief is caused by the process of immigration, assimilation, and racialization (Han and Eng 667). They argue that racial melancholy can be used to contextualize how there is an intangible loss within the intersectional experience that shapes the Asian American psyche (Han and Eng 674). This can be compared to Mitski's "Your Best American Girl", as the song portrays the feeling of the loss of unattainable ideals within an American cultural context. Asian Americans are, thus, forced to mimic the stereotype to be recognized by the public, which causes the feeling of melancholy as this means they will always fail to assimilate into the 'regimes of whiteness' (Han and Eng 677). Thus, the industry demands a white female 'sad girl' stereotype to succeed in the current landscape of the music industry. This results in female artists being forced into a stereotype, which causes alienation from their identity, leading to a melancholic state.

The article by Mestrich analyzes how Mitski is positioned in the American music landscape with her half-American and half-Japanese nationality by analyzing the reliability of her songs to white Americans. Her song, "Your Best American Girl," tells a narrative of a young woman feeling too "foreign" for her white American partner and failing her lovers' expectations, accompanied by guilt and shame. Mestrich writes, "flattening the song into an anthem of female self-empowerment is to ignore its inherently racial message". By reducing the song to feminine sadness, it removes the underlying racial themes and limits the depth that these songs might contain. Relatability is an important characteristic of the genre, and a reason why so many young women, especially, are attracted to this genre. However, as Mestrich expressed, they might not fully understand the lyrics as it is not just about a failed romance but how her interracial identity leads her to believe she cannot be what her parents need. Therefore, listeners are removing parts of her identity by trying to relate to a song that

talks about an issue they might not be able to understand. Mestrich argues that when songs about womanhood overlook racial identity, they reinforce a white-centric view of feminism, which can function as a form of white supremacy as it excludes other races from feminism and womanhood. This reflects Han and Eng's theory of how the racial melancholic subject is forced to conform to the white sad stereotype to be accepted within the music industry as well as society in general.

To summarize the social situation of the sad artist, Deng explains in her article how the sad girl indie genre is prone to erasing the identity of the artist through the continued misinterpretation of their emotions by critics and fans, which typifies Freud's model of melancholy (15). Freud argued that a melancholic subject experiences a loss of ego, resulting in a state of perpetual mourning (247). Thus, the artist disappears when the feeling of melancholy overtakes the music. This loss of identity is as a process in which melancholia in music leads the artist to become the subject of their grief, causing them to be consumed by the stereotype of womanhood (Deng 252). Essentially, they lose themselves in their music, which gets amplified by fans who fail to see their favorite artist as people and instead project their own emotions onto them. Therefore, the image of the sad girl indie becomes "an exemplary character of womanhood to sell to the public eye, endangering her real self" (Deng 17). Thus, the 'sad girl' character portrays a stereotype of womanhood established by the historical pathologizing of women's mental health, ultimately leading to a break in the artists' psyche as they lose themselves to melancholy.

FEMALE COMMUNITY IN A MALE BUSINESS

There are also positive attributes to be given to this genre, as it is an inherently female genre in a music industry that favors men. It creates safe spaces and a community for women in the industry. The name of the genre is a gendered term as it clearly states 'girl' in the title. This

could allude to either the artists or their listeners, as the artists featured in this genre are usually girls, and their fan base mainly consists of young girls. The music of these women is often put in the same playlist, which garners some interest in the Spotify playlist called “sad girl starter pack”, which currently holds 1,552,712 saves. This playlist is made by Spotify and claims it’s made for the listener, so the songs featured in the playlist fall under the sad girl genre; however, they also cater to the listener’s preferences. This form of gendered categorization through playlists creates spaces for women on the internet. The community function in the genre can be compared to the rise of girl groups in the 60s, who influenced how women were perceived in the music industry but also all aspects of the social life of women (MacLoad 273). In the 21st century, there is a similar kind of community within the sad girl genre, as artists working within this melancholic box often seem to come together. This can be seen in the background vocals. For example, Lorde’s “Solar Power”, which was mentioned earlier, features background vocals from Phoebe Bridgers and Clairo, and Lucy Dacus’ “Going Going Gone” features artists such as Phoebe Bridgers, Julian Baker, Mitski, and Hayley Williams. Thus, there is a trend going on where female artists who work within the same genre often form bonds and a community through their music. Therefore, it can be stated that the sad indie community forms a community within the music industry. Lucy Dacus touches upon this in an interview with Rebecca Haithcoat in *VICE*. In this article, she expresses how there is a lack of women working in the industry and how she feels safer when working with a female sound person. Dacus explains how,

‘There are assholes everywhere. Sound guys who will address my band and not me,’ she says. ‘I really miss seeing women in charge of things. I’d love to see or at least know about labels run by women. Or venues run by women. Sound women. I’m always thrilled when I have a sound woman to talk to, because without a doubt, they

are more attentive. Every time I had a female sound person, they were way more communicative and understanding.’ (Dacus qtd. in Haithcoat)

The study by Stacy Smith, Katherine Pieper, Karla Hernandez, and Sam Wheeler on the inclusion in the music industry elaborates on Dacus’ experience. It investigated the representation of women (of color) from 2012 to 2022, which showed the lack of women working in the music industry. In their report, they assess the gender and race of everyone credited on the roles of artists, songwriters, and producers on 1100 songs from the year 2012 to 2022 (Smith et al 1). Despite the progress achieved over the last few decades, women are still vastly underrepresented in the industry. The report showed that of the 160 artists in the Hot 100 Billboard Year End Chart in 2022, 69.4% were male, and 30% were female. Additionally, 51.9% of these artists were white. In these 11 years, a total of 5247 songwriters were credited on songs appearing in the End Chart, and in the year 2022, 85.7% of these songwriters were male and 14% were female. They concluded that the overall ratio of men to women songwriters is around 6.8 to 1. Moreover, 57% of songs analyzed across 11 years did not include a single women songwriter, whereas less than 1% or 6 songs were missing a male songwriter (Smith et al. 2). At last, 2.8% of all producers were women while 97.1% were men, which is a ratio of 34.1 to every woman, and of the songs examined, only 5.2% had at least one female producer, with only 9 women of color. Therefore, similarly to what Dacus expressed in the quote in *VICE*, there is a notably low number of women working in the music industry, which can make it difficult to be understood as the only woman in the room. The genre central in this thesis focuses on women, as is written in the name; therefore, it can become a community in a larger male-oriented music industry, for example, by doing background vocals.

The grouping of women through the workings of the sad girl indie genre shows how they can create a bigger understanding and presence for female musicians in the current

music industry, which seems to favor male musicians. For example, the rock genre that mostly consists of male musicians often tokenizes women due to the lack of gender diversity; however, the sad girl genre seems to promote more women in music (Osten). Therefore, in the music industry at large, it seems promising that women take up space through the sad girl genre; however, it is interesting to note that women are overwhelmingly more popular in a genre that is characterized by vulnerability and melancholy. This shows how stereotypical views on female musicians persist in contemporary society. The genre's overrepresentation of women can be attributed to the historical tradition of stereotyping women as overly emotional or mad, especially regarding the creative arts, a pattern established in the first chapter. The 'sad girl indie' genre is, thus, inherently gendered, which puts women under a patronizing label. Moreover, they become role models to their fans, who romanticize this stereotype on social media.

TRIVIALIZING AND ROMANTICIZING MELANCHOLY

Schellenberg and Von Scheve explained how there is an interplay between social and cultural effects and the emotions expressed by artists and the emotional needs of their listeners, which leads to the making of marketing strategies in the music industry - especially regarding the rise of streaming services that increase direct contact between artists and consumers (7).

Moreover, the rise of social media in general has intensified the relationship between fans and their favorite artists, which can lead to parasocial relationships. Therefore, not only do artists form a community within this genre, but the fans are also part of it, which is what makes it an interesting subculture within the music scene. The romanticization of sadness can become problematic in the genre when listeners identify with the lyrics and internalize the emotions expressed. According to Zoe Alderton, there is a risk in social media about the influence of the "ideal woman presented through art"; therefore, artists need to be careful how they represent themselves on social platforms (100).

For example, Bridgers expressed in the article by Hirschberg how she uses humor to cope with the idea of the depressed artist, by stating how she is “selling depression in a funny way” (qtd. in Osten). She also expressed how she still struggles with depression in a public sphere. She says, “I like using social media to strip back that idea of the depressed artist. But I do get self-conscious of my whole Twitter being Phoebe Bridgers jokes. I want to have a healthier relationship with social media than [expletive]-posting all day about myself” (Bridgers qtd. in Hirschberg). Thus, she uses humor on social media to de-escalate the image of the depressed artist by making jokes, even if it is at her own cost. Thelandersson talked about this coping mechanism in her book through ‘the relatable self’. She writes, “By packaging potentially heavy topics such as depression and anxiety ... one is disarming the topics of their seriousness and weight” (Thelandersson 68). Therefore, while humor can open serious topics for discussion, it may also trivialize them. Humor can serve as a double function, as it, on the one hand, allows one to discuss serious topics, making difficult topics such as depression and anxiety tangible, which can help make those feelings less overwhelming and more manageable (68). On the other hand, as was mentioned before, the comedic style of coping with tough subject matters can downplay the seriousness of living with mental health issues, which can lead to listeners not taking their feelings seriously and not looking for help if they need it. This is in stark contrast to how Del Rey approached social media, as she perpetuates the idea of the sad artist on social media. According to Zoe Alderton, this is not necessarily a negative thing as she analyses the critique of Del Rey’s supposedly non-feminist image. Alderton argues that Del Rey represents a narrative of female weakness, sadness, and failure, and how that makes her a spokesperson for a generation who feels left out of the market economy, admitting that being depressed or hurt does not make one less of a feminist (100). This creates a space for young women who feel like they are either betraying their gender or the movement when not proactive to live a life of success and happiness; therefore, through

openly asserting themselves with the narrative of female weakness, Del Rey leaves space for emotional nuances. Moreover, it gives a sense of authenticity instead of refuting emotions with humor. There is a clear difference between how Bridgers and Del Rey approach social media and how they communicate with their fans. This shows the social and cultural differences of the time in how society perceived depression and mental health, as Del Rey began her career half a decade earlier than Bridgers.

Fans themselves also like to joke online about the sad nature of their favorite artists. Again, trivializing the seriousness of the topics discussed in the lyrics of the ‘sad girl indie’ songs. Mestrich explains how fan culture often manifests itself in humor: “We [fans] like to joke about Mitski’s sadness online because it allows us to express our own emotions without the vulnerability of stating them outright”. This makes it a safe way to express one’s feelings through music. However, the close connection fans have to their favorite artists can become dangerous when they do not see the artist as a fellow human being, but as an idol on whom they can express their feelings and even wishes. This is the case with Mitski as she rises to fame. In an article that interviewed Mitski about the connection to her fans, the author writes, “With songs about heartbreak and capitalism, the cult pop singer is on the brink of the mainstream – but the intensity of her fandom has her fearing for her safety” (Beaumont-Thomas). Mitski has become a cult figure of sadness that caused her to become a mirror on which people can reflect their issues; therefore, the identity of the artist disappears in their melancholic music, as Deng explained in her article (19). The interview quotes Mitski in which she describes how she feels being perceived as a sad girl indie artist,

‘I am a musician, but the reason they really pay me the big bucks’ – she smiles wryly – ‘is to be the place where anybody can put all of their feelings, their ugliness, that doesn’t have a place in their own lives. I’m like the black hole where people can

dump all their shit, whether it's a need for love, or it's hatred and anger'. (qtd. in Beaumont-Thomas)

Mitski emphasizes here the commercial role of vulnerability and relatability in music that empowers the 'sad girl indie' genre. She continues to explain how her fans do not seem to recognize her as a human being but as a product to be consumed. In the same interview, Mitski explains that fans seeking autographs overlook her crying face while being overwhelmed by her surroundings. She explains how, "People started to grab at my shirt and, by the time I got out, my shirt was basically off. It was an emblematic moment – that has been happening to me in different ways." (Mitski qtd. in Beaumont-Thomas). She emphasizes how, through her career, she has experienced repeated invasions of her personal space, which could be a response to the intense relatability and the emotional connection fans feel within the 'sad girl indie' genre. Deng explains how there is an appeal to the specific types of pain expressed in the lyrics of 'sad girl indie' music in which listeners play "dress up with their scars", while calling it relatability, which leads to a larger societal pressure for emotional labor in music (19). Moreover, it can even endanger female artists, as seen in the case of Mitski, when fans do not identify with the artist but with the melancholic subject presented in their music. This idolized subject is romanticized, leading to the perpetuation of female historical stereotypes. Thus, one must weigh the good and bad that surrounds this genre as it offers both community and solitude.

MAD GIRL MOVEMENT

Mitski calls out how the sad girl genre is reductive by saying, "let's retire the sad girl shtick. It's over. Sad girl is over" (Mitski qtd. in Mestrich). Even though the sad girl aesthetic seems to be nowhere close to disappearing with artists such as Billie Eilish topping the charts, there is a new movement on the rise. An opinion piece by Ben Fenison about Lola Young called

“Lola Young Leads the Shift from Sad to Mad Girl Vibes” describes the shift in the music industry. He writes how the era of melancholic and poetic sorrow is coming to an end to make way for a “Mad Girl” movement led by artists such as Lola Young, Chappell Roan, and Reneé Rapp. According to Fenison, “This shift reflects a broader cultural moment where female artists embrace rage and self-expression without softening their intensity, redefining emotional catharsis in indie and alternative music.” The two movements share a cathartic element, where one is rooted in sadness and relatability, and the other is rooted in anger and confrontation. This signals a shift in the music industry, where women no longer need to conform to the expectation of society to be vulnerable and attractive to be accepted in the music industry.

The current state of the world is asking for more authenticity and raw honesty, which artists such as Lola Young and Chappell Roan offer in the indie and alternative music sphere, by turning “quiet sadness into a loud, unrestrained cry of empowerment” (Fenison). One has to wait to see how the music industry and the general public will respond to this development; however, the upcoming artists have already received some backlash for being too brash and outspoken. As confirmed in a 2014 interview with Del Rey, this pattern reflects a broader trend in the music industry, where female pop stars are often subjected to vitriol by the music industry, cast as provocateurs and harshly judged for expressing emotion, whether it manifests as sadness or anger. This makes one wonder if female musicians will always be subject to criticism based on stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

The interviews analyzed with quotes from Lana Del Rey, Phoebe Bridgers, Lorde, Lucy Dacus, and Mitski reveal how the commodification of the ‘sad girl indie’ persona within the music industry reflects a complex interplay between gender, emotion, and market forces. The

aesthetic has created a space for emotional expression since the 2010s. The narrative of mental health has changed over the years, going from a time where female empowerment was encouraged and mental health was not open to discussion to maintain the image of the empowered woman, to a time that craves for authenticity that opened the conversation on social media and beyond. However, the genre has also created restrictive expectations by creating a ‘melancholic box’ for artists in this genre. Through the lens of melancholy, theorized by Freud, Deng, and Thelandersson, it becomes clear how female musicians are expected to embody sadness to attain artistic and commercial legitimacy in the music industry. This influences both their music and how their identities are constructed. Their experience illustrates how their music has been reduced to a marketable stereotype that commodifies female pain. This is especially relevant in the case of Mitski, as her case study contained the racial and cultural nuances within the tensions between melancholy and identity. This revealed how white-centric feminism, prevalent within the genre, can erase intersectional experiences, which flatten the emotional depth within their songs. At the same time, the genre offers a sense of community and visibility in a music industry that marginalizes women (of color). The genre provides a platform for artists to form supportive networks that can resist isolating effects within a male-dominated music industry that focuses on commodification. Yet, there is a new movement beginning to rise that challenges the passive and melancholic persona and replaces it with rage and defiance, the ‘mad girl’, who signals a redefinition of femininity in music that defies the stereotypes set up through history. To conclude, the ‘sad girl indie’ persona is a product of cultural and commercial forces that have shaped the genre as we know it today. Therefore, the music industry commodifies this persona by constraining the genre to its melancholic box and maintaining age-old stereotypes of women for mass consumption. It may limit artistic freedom, but it also creates platforms for female expression.

CONCLUSION

In this modern era of music, women are still finding their place in the music industry. It seems they found a place within the 'sad girl indie' genre, created by and for women. The modern 'sad girl' aesthetic was popularized on platforms like Tumblr, where discussions around music and mental health grew. One could state that the origins of the sad girl indie genre lie in the 1960s, as during that time, we see a notable rise in sad-sounding songs and the creation of more female groups. This development, combined with the rise of the modern 'sad girl' in the early 2010s, led to the emergence of 'sad girl indie'. The genre falls under 'indie' or 'independent music' as it creates its value through exclusivity and its cultural capital through social differentiation. As it falls under 'indie' music rather than mainstream popular music, it creates its own space within the music industry for people in need of community, where people can foster emotional relatability. This thesis followed the research question: How does the gendering of the 21st-century 'Sad girl indie' genre reinforce societal expectations of female emotion compared to the historical representation of female melancholy in indie music as exemplified by the artistry and reception of the careers of American 'sad girl indie' artists? This was answered through the analytical approach of analyzing the lyrics of songs by Lana Del Rey, Phoebe Bridgers, and Lizzy McAlpine, followed by a discourse analysis of artists in interviews online, outspoken about the inner workings of the genre and the music industry more generally. These findings were supported by the theoretical framework of Thelanderson about sad girl culture, Freud about melancholic behavior, and Theodor Adorno on the commodification in music, supported by contemporary perspectives.

The thesis began by diving into the historical lineage of the pathologization of female sadness, through hysteria and melancholia, and how it feeds into the sad girl persona of the 21st century. The prevalent figure of the tortured artist is central regarding mental illness in

the lives of artists, where sadness in music is used as a creative force. It revealed how the genre captures emotion in songwriting by using confession and authenticity in music, in combination with tying into the historical image of the melancholic woman. These findings were then put into perspective through lyrical and musical analyses, showing how emotion and vulnerability are used as artistic expression and a marketable identity alike through the melancholic feeling shaped by gendered expectations of women. Their songs reaffirm the stereotype of women as emotionally fragile, as was made clear with Del Rey's example.

However, it can also reclaim the emotion of sadness as a powerful tool of storytelling, which was more prevalent in the case of McAlpine and her confessional storytelling. Bridgers' song was a clear example of Freud's melancholy as the state of mind comes from a place of grief, whereas Del Rey utilized melancholy to romanticize her sadness to cater to the male gaze.

Therefore, melancholy in music perpetuates stereotypes of female sadness, where gendered sadness borders between personal vulnerability and commercial viability. The study, then, expanded on how the music industry commodifies female melancholy through testimonies of artists in interviews. These artists are challenged with the tension between authenticity and marketability as they are being reduced to the 'sad girl' label, which makes one question if they are part of the genre of their own volition or if the label is forced upon them by patriarchal forces set up by the history of pathologizing women. This label is met with restrictive expectations of female artists, as through the lens of melancholy, they are expected to embody sadness to attain popularity in the music industry. This causes their music to be reduced to a marketable stereotype of white female sadness. However, the findings also showed how the genre can become a supportive community that resists isolation effects in a music industry that favors male artists. Therefore, this thesis reveals how the commodification of the 'sad girl indie' persona simultaneously reinforces historical

stereotypes of female emotion while offering a subversive space for community and emotional expression within a male-dominated industry.

It was a challenge to find enough existing research on the topic, as the genre is still relatively new and has received little to no research from academia. This study aims to fill that gap in academia by drawing attention to the problems within the genre, as it serves as a valuable case study for researching the role of women in the music industry. The research used focused primarily on femininity and sadness in music, which this thesis combined to create a framework for understanding the inner workings of the genre. The analysis of lyrics combined with interview testimonies offered a nuanced perspective on the artists' interpretations of the genre. However, song lyrics can be interpreted in many different ways; therefore, the use of interviews provided a space to highlight the artists' perspectives. The last chapter was met with certain limitations, as not every artist discussed in the previous chapter had relevant interviews to be found on this topic. As a result, the study expanded its scope to include the artists that best exemplified the theoretical concepts outlined in previous chapters. The thesis also raised multiple questions about other aspects of the role of women within the music industry. Possible further research could include a larger focus on the new 'mad girl' movement that rose over the last year, which could, perhaps, put the 'sad girl indie' genre at risk. This prompt could pave the way for broader research on how the music industry functions in an era shaped by post-feminism and metamodernism, as, according to this thesis, it simultaneously perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes and promotes narratives of empowerment.

To conclude, it can be stated that there is a duality within the genre, as it creates space for open discussion about mental health and connection to people who struggle with the same mental health issue; however, there is also a risk that the increasingly popular genre reduces female expression to a marketable trope. This persona is shaped through historical notions of

the hysterical, mad woman, who is deemed desirable by the male gaze. On the other hand, in a male-dominated music industry, the 'sad girl indie' genre not only provides a safe space and a community for women, but it also celebrates them. The genre's music is about the female experience, which has been underrepresented in history. However, it is also a place of exclusion as it focuses on the white female experience that excludes intersectional thinking. Thus, by analyzing what the lyrics tell us compared to the experiences of being a 'sad girl indie' artist in the current music industry, the genre both resists and reinforces patriarchal cultural narratives. These melancholic melodies, thus, tell us a story about the history of female pain and how they found each other through music.

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