

## The Glamorisation of Mental Illness Online

### Introduction

“the energy regained to maintain happy appearances on social media can be exhausting. It forces many students to hide who they really believe they are and teaches them that anything that doesn't present a “happy face” is best kept out of the view.” (D. Freitas 2017, p. 15)

When Facebook surfaced in 2004, it was defined as a product of sharing. Six years later it was conveniently succeeded by Instagram, a platform defined by sharing perfection. By illustrating how social media is driving us to appear perfect at any cost, Donna Freitas shares common ground with a movement which existed long before the Internet. Defined by Thomas Henricks as the ‘Happiness Cult’ (2016), it describes a collective obsession of society to be happy and to be perceived as such. Finding euphoria on social media, this term developed on the internet as a visually driven movement of nice quotes, silly cat posts and #fitspiration. It overwhelms you with positivity, to a point where “even reluctant individuals are forced to conform.” (A.M. Paul 2011) Happiness has become the overruling aesthetic online; is there any better place than a virtual world to communicate the epitome of perfect and wonderful? Identifying itself as hegemony, and thus referring to a dominant group that exerts “total social authority” over other subordinate groups, (S. Hall as cited by D. Hebdige 1979, p. 16) everything slightly “other” is perceived as unnatural.

Where hegemony takes place, a countermovement emerges and this countermovement found its victory in sadness. On the other side of the spectrum an ever-reoccurring group of melancholic peers rebel against the positivity that is forced upon them. By posting crying selfies and wallowing in pastel pink hues, the 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘Sad Girl’ subculture glorifies mental illnesses for their own stylistic purposes. Hiding behind an online identity, its members obtain the benefits of an attractive aesthetic, without the downside of being confronted with the stigmatization surrounding mental illness in real life.

The diffusing nature of the Internet caused the Sad Girl aesthetic to find ground in the mainstream. Borrowing its satirical humour and witty sarcasm, this translation from subculture to the mass mainly manifested in the form of memes. The share-ability and humoristic quality of memes has proved to be highly attractive to teenagers. (W. Syfret 2017) Defined as a generation that is living in a time of depression and proven to be unsettled, insecure, narcissistic and exhibitionistic (C. Barr 2016), Gen Z seems a perfect vehicle to re-establish the Sad Girl aesthetic. Although this re-adaption shows the potential to eliminate the stigmatization surrounding mental illness and make people open up about their emotional struggles; often, its outcome online is stripped down from political tendencies and focused on a narcissist's attempt for attention. By not shying away from throwing in terms like ‘OCD’, ‘anxiety’, ‘depression’ and ‘bipolar’ to describe their daily struggle with everyday life, it is likely that this movement, very closely engaged with the dangerous territory of mental illnesses, has the ability to develop new stereotypes surrounding this stigmatized subject as memes and other outings of the Sad Girl aesthetic gain popularity.

## Theoretical Framework

### Case Studies

To gain knowledge on the 21<sup>st</sup> century Sad Girl subculture and its aesthetics, the circulation of its reputation within mass media and the ways it has produced methods for the mainstream to popularize its aesthetic, I looked at two examples of Sad Girls that use different social media platforms to communicate their aesthetic and different motivations to adopt a Sad Girl persona online. Both have the prospect to deliver unique insights to my research.

Arguably the most iconic in providing a sad alternative to online's overwhelming amount of positivity display in the form of Tweets, Twitter phenomenon @SoSadToday gained substantial popularity due to her ironic and gimmicky character. By applying this humour to her struggles with mental illness, it prospers an opportunity for teenagers to feel comfortable to talk about mental illnesses in a more casual way. @SoSadToday's anonymity on Twitter illustrates an example of "sad" as an extension of online identity without being linked to an offline persona. It also perfectly illustrates the communication of mental illness through the use of humour and satire.

The second "Sad Girl" I have researched has been called the "patron Goddess" of the Sad Girl subculture. Audrey Wollen created an online performance on Instagram to empower and unite women. Consciously using the Sad Girl aesthetic to rebel against the repressing of female emotions and the idea that girls have to be "happy and passive", Wollen made headlines by promoting her Instagram presence not as an act of narcissistic panic but one of feminist resistance. This might provide interesting insights when combined with the online 'Happiness Cult' and shows qualities of offering a countermovement towards the pressure to be perceived as perfect online.

### Theory

Approaching the portrayal of happiness on social media as the norm online, I've conducted research into this phenomenon by mainly looking at the article 'The Happiness Cult' by Thomas Henricks and reading the book 'The Happiness Effect: How Social Media Is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost' by Donna Freitas.

In the article 'The Happiness Cult' Henricks describes society's urge to be happy before the Internet existed, and briefly touches upon the expression of happiness to others through appearance. This illustrates that the attractiveness of being happy and the preference towards people that appear happy are not constructs that are created through the Internet, but deeply embedded in our culture which might lead to different insights when looking at its expression on social media.

The book 'The Happiness Effect: How Social Media Is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost' describes the construction of pressure on teenagers to appear happy online and the negative effects this has on their well-being. Within the book, she touches upon the oppression of sad emotions and the effects of deviating from a positive image online which might lead to mental health problems amongst teens. These ideas demonstrate the problems surrounding the stigma around expressing mental health problems and the need for a countermovement, which supports my approach to illustrate the Sad Girl subculture as a countermovement.

Focussing on the Sad Girl subculture's aesthetic as its strongest weapon and possible vehicle for the glamorisation of mental illness, I used Dick Hebdige's book 'Subculture – The Meaning of Style' as

theoretical source for approaching this subculture. Focussing on the relationship between subculture and style, Hebdige's explanation on the process from hegemony to subculture to eventually the mainstream is extremely useful when looking at the glamorisation and creating of new stereotyping surrounding mental illnesses.

To illustrate teenagers' online behaviour and motivations, I will make use of the book 'It's Complicated' by Danah Boyd. Consulting the work of psychologist Sherry Turkle and sociologist Ervin Goffman amongst others, Boyd explores the social lives of networked teens through themes such as privacy, context and danger. Although the book is written in 2014 and focusses on American youth, Boyd describes fundamental insights of teenagers' motivation for online sharing that are still very relevant today, only now this online sharing is being conducted on different social media platforms. When talking about the subject 'danger', Danah Boyd dedicates a significant part of her book to the sharing of teenage struggles which very much correlates with my research and provides very interesting insights when combined with the topic of this paper.

### **Methodology**

In this paper, I aim to analyse the shift from mental illness as a taboo subject to mental illness as an accessory of online identity construction.

I will first look at social media platforms and what is considered the hegemony amongst these platforms. Analysing the idea of the 'Happiness Cult' and applying this concept online, I consider this online movement as the norm. After establishing the norm, I will try to answer my main research question: "How did social media manifest the glamorisation of mental illnesses?" by diving into two possible ventures. First, I will look at the 21<sup>st</sup> century Sad Girl subculture, its characteristics, aesthetic, motivations and its transition to the mainstream. Simultaneously, I will analyse teenagers' motivations for online sharing, their correlation with the popularisation of sharing mental illnesses as well as their potential to provide a countermovement to the online 'Happiness Cult' and the stigmatization of mental illnesses.

Knowledge on the possible consequences of the glamorisation of mental illness and the construction of this movement in our social media driven society can lead to insights into further creation of stereotyping within a generation that is interlinked with a high rate of mental illness and that cultivates their image by reducing everything as an accessory of their identity.

### **Limitations**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Sad Girl subculture is made up almost exclusively of female teenagers and adolescents, communicating the Sad Girl aesthetic with a feminist fight against the "happy passive girl" stereotype as hidden agenda.

This trend continues within the mainstream equivalent of this movement. As the communication of sad memes and the usage of sad as an extension of online identity construction is conducted mainly by female teenagers. Because of this fact, I have mainly focused my research on the sharing behaviour of teenage girls on social media.

## Discussion

### 1. The Online 'Happiness Cult'

#### Society and the Attractiveness of Happiness

"In every way, it seems, optimists bask in the sunshine of the world's approbation, while pessimists mope in the shadows." (A.M. Paul 2011)

The original term 'Happiness Cult' (T. Henricks 2016) was used to describe society's quest for happiness through leisure. Henricks (2016) explains a shift within the meaning of the good life, claiming it has lost its connection with "doing good" and became associated with the self-centred "feeling good". The "cult" part, he claims, comes from the obligatory factor this leisure brings to society. "It is the community of similarly engaged others that proclaims the value of these activities and ensures that they are pursued. If once voluntary, leisure now obligates. Nor is it leisurely. Sad is the person who cannot mix at a party; ... He or she must not embarrass the side when competing in the game of the moment." (T. Henricks 2016) Martha Wolfenstein calls this phenomenon 'fun morality'. She explains "in such ways the self is decorated and made attractive to others. Everyday living, so many of us believe, should be punctuated by pleasure-centred "events." Aesthetic realization is its grand prize." (M. Wolfenstein as cited by T. Henricks 2016)

#### The 'Happiness Cult' and Online Identity Construction

"Getting 'likes' is a central part of the performance of perfection and positivity. Not only does it prove that you "are", but it also is a quantifiable mark of success and affirmation. On the flip side, the inability to obtain quantifiable public approval is a source of shame." (D. Freitas 2017, p. 41)

Online, this search for happiness and this aesthetic realisation is reduced to kittens, puppies, babies and smiles. Facebook evolved from an outlet for minor thoughts and connector to close friends to a concoction of pure bliss and a parading of life fulfilment. Instagram makes this parading about visual perfection; Twitter screams "happy thoughts". Reducing happiness to 'likes' as the ultimate form of acceptance, this voyeuristic idea of displaying and absorbing happiness allows no space for sad stories or impure commentary. Keeping up appearances as a core of social media sites implies the pressure for a positive representation of the self.

In the time Facebook was still used as the main platform to communicate this happy alternative to life, a phenomenon called 'Facebook depression' (P. Newton 2012) started surfacing on the Internet, a type of depression that occurred when spending too much time looking at the profiles of people's perfect online presentation. Its effects were described as "feelings of dejection about the pathetic state of one's own life." (P. Newton 2012) A possible solution followed by this same author, saying: "One way to break the vicious cycle would be to all suddenly get brutally honest on Facebook. Or we could simultaneously, by general agreement... go back to communicating by old-fashioned methods, where we're not so inclined to aggressively promote the idea of our own happiness. But we would have to do it

collectively, like a movement.” Little did she know this movement would spread over other platforms to come, and reach its peak five years later.

Deemed as the platform of utter visual perfection, Instagram is a highly popular outlet to share all things positive. The fact that its aesthetic often contradicts the reality of everyday life does not keep people from using Instagram as a vehicle to endorse a happy self. “The only purpose of Instagram is to promote the highlights of your life, and often people will focus on parties, holidays, times with friends. My own posts rarely reflect my feelings when I am sad, depressed or lonely and entirely reflect the positive side of my life.” (W. Roberts as cited by C. Fishwick 2016) Responsible for what drove the online “Happiness Cult” to a set aesthetic of expensive atleisure wear and vegan foodporn, it shuts down any possible attempt to an alternative and arguably more authentic representation of life. To illustrate an example of this shutdown is the unpopularity of the app Beme. Beme started off as an “authentic” social platform, set up in a way that would prevent users from curating content or creating “fake” versions of their lives. (M. Hackett 2016) The app recognized the change in representation online and saw the opportunity to provide a more “real” alternative. However after one year, the app announced its end, stating: “From the beginning, we set out to build a more honest way of sharing lives and experiences from around the globe. With your help, we did. We can’t thank you enough for being a part of Beme.” (Beme.com n.d.)

### **Happiness as The Norm**

“Provocative opinions get you rejected by friends and acquaintances, and perhaps even by the employer of your dreams...The importance of appearing happy on social media - the duty to appear happy - even if you are severely depressed and lonely is so paramount that nearly everyone I spoke to mentioned it at some point.” (D. Freitas 2017, p. 15)

As the standard on SNS is very clearly communicated, what deviates from this representation is treated as unpopular, and the person behind this aesthetic “misfit” is immediately brushed off as undisciplined and unambitious, subsequently punished with the withdrawal of likes and followers. Barbara Ehrenreich (as cited by B. Appleyard 2015), the author of ‘Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World.’ claims that “If optimism is the key to material success, and if you can achieve an optimistic outlook through the discipline of positive thinking, then there is no excuse for failure.” This label “failure” that gets forced upon people when not expressing happiness is consequently an effect of the judging qualities of social media. “The funny part, though, is that we’re all doing it to each other. The same people who are making you feel like a loser because you don’t have children are feeling like losers looking at your profile because you go on such exotic trips.” (P. Newton 2012)

Adopting the dominant and commercialised image of happiness that has been projected in mass media from the start, social media developed hegemony around the ‘Happiness Cult’, establishing the rule of strictly positive identity construction as the norm online. When this norm becomes internalised, there is a tendency towards feeling inferior when not feeling happy all the time, or at least being very good at faking it.

## **2. The Sad Girl Subculture**

“They [subcultures] go against the grain of a mainstream culture whose principal defining characteristic is a tendency to masquerade as nature, to substitute ‘normalized’ for historical forms, to translate the reality of the world into an image of the world which in turn presents itself as if composed according to ‘the evident laws of the natural order.’” (R. Barthes as cited by D. Hebdige 1979, p. 102)

Where dominant culture appears, it automatically stimulates the existence of subcultures to object it. Treating the online ‘Happiness Cult’ as the norm, everything purposefully “other” becomes a merit for rebellion. The Sad Girl subculture, a group of peers that champions the wallowing in sadness is the literal embodiment of a rebellion towards happiness. Discussing the topic of sharing sadness in a context of hegemony and subculture, it is evident to analyse Dick Hebdige’s book ‘Subculture – The Meaning of Style’ as a parallel structure to my own discussion. Specifically, I will use his understanding of how a subculture comes to being and defies hegemony, how it roots itself into style, and how eventually it submerges into mainstream.

### **A Voice for the Sad Girl**

“Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range.” (S. Hall as cited by D. Hebdige 1979, p. 16)

By sharing emotional struggles online, the Sad Girl subculture challenges the idea that there is a place for negative thoughts other than behind closed doors. Although not the first teenagers to share their emotions, Emo’s and Goths being the most well-known examples of this, the Sad Girl subculture has developed itself right in time to take over the Internet. Having found a steady habitat in the realms of the world-wide web, Sad Girls have created a community, a voice of their own. This voice is one that moves past the Sad Girl stereotype communicated in films or series, giving these teenagers the leverage to completely be in control of their own identity.

To get a better understanding of what this voice entails, it is evident to look at examples of Sad Girls online.

### **Establishing a Stereotype**

“The challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style.” (D. Hebdige 1979, p. 17)

Establishing herself on Instagram as ‘tragic queen’, Audrey Wollen identifies her online persona through the Sad Girl subculture and has been claimed the leader of it after she gained popularity. Crying selfies (fig. 1), photos of bruises, and various shades of pink adorn (fig. 2) her Instagram account. Expressing a resolute negative opinion on society and life in a rather sarcastic tone, her profile meets what could be thought off as the ultimate Sad Girl. Choosing to display herself through the social media platform Instagram, the overall look of her profile radiates a narcissistic focus, as eighty per cent of her posts are selfies.

Evaluating the Twitter account of @SoSadToday, a well-known and very popular example of the Sad Girl subculture, this same narcissistic viewpoint is apparent, however this time rather in words

than in images. Tweeting things like: “Oops totally didn’t mean to be too fragile for this world,” her satirical and ironic way of communicating self-loathing comes across immediately.

Both having concurred a significant position within the Sad Girl subculture, their popular way of communicating quickly became one to aspire and follow. Their voice became a unified one to express sadness within the Sad Girl subculture, and society’s obsession with labelling and defining manifested a stereotype out of these girls sharing negative emotions. This unified voice Hebdige explains in the idea that subcultures initially form through a common resistance. Once the media discovers subculture, it reacts to this with an immediate (sometimes unconscious) aversion and the need to identify this subculture by reducing it to an overall idea. (D. Hebdige 1979, p. 94) A Sad Girl now means you are quirky, sassy, inherently self-obsessed, often neurotic and ultimately, sad. “The sad girl is sarcastic, witty and self-deprecating. She listens to better music than you and might spend her alone time watching French films from the ‘60s or angsty TV shows from the ‘90s. The Sad Girl has a killer sense of style... She’s funny in a #dark way because she likes her comedy like she likes her coffee: “dark, bitter and too hot for you.”” (S. Gore 2014) someone says on Tumblr, “Her brand of melancholy has an air of weariness, disillusionment, and above all things an awareness of being looked at.” (L. Zolads 2014) says another source.

Singling out the word “brand” in this sentence, it is important to establish that the Sad Girl stereotype circulating the Internet has enquired physical characteristics next to personality traits. Stressing the link between subculture and style, Hebdige defines style as part of a subculture’s alternative value systems to differentiate themselves from the ‘parent culture’. This separation is achieved materially through the subculture’s adoption and adaption of objects seen by the group as meaningful. These objects form the collective self-image of the culture. (S. Hall as cited by R. Guins and O. Z. Cruz 2005, p. 364) “It is through the distinctive rituals of consumption, through style, that the subculture at once reveals its ‘secret’ identity and communicates its forbidden meanings. It is basically the way in which commodities are used in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations.” (D. Hebdige 1979, p. 103)

In this context, The Sad Girl aesthetic is the gloomy equivalent of the positive image that is central within the online ‘Happiness Cult’. Both relying on the same formula of commodification, they share the quality of narcissism, superficiality, and identity performance, making it hard to acknowledge this subculture as a counter-reaction to the overly fake online happiness in the first place.

Others however, rule in favour of the expression of this aesthetic and vouch this movement does have a political potential that stems away from personal needs and communicates an alternative for this happy archetype.

### **Politically Engaged or Addicted to Attention?**

“The meaning of subculture is, then, always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force... But it ends in the construction of a style, in a gesture of defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer. It signals a refusal. I would like to think that this refusal is worth making, that these gestures have a meaning, that the smiles and the sneers have some subversive value, even if, in the final analysis, they are... just the darker side of sets of regulations.” (D. Hebdige 1979, p. 3)

Having established the Sad Girl stereotype, the next step is to investigate how these Sad Girl figureheads are perceived online, and how they are influencing society. To determine this, we first have to look at the motivations behind this branding of the online self as Sad Girl. This becomes apparent when revisiting and comparing the profiles of @SoSadToday and Audrey Wollen.

Audrey Wollen seems to have found a political voice through adopting a Sad Girl Aesthetic. When analysing the actual content of Wollen's profile it becomes noticeable that this focuses on something other than an outlet for personal struggles, as she addresses women and society in general as the main topic of her content (fig. 3). This adds another layer to her online presence that moves away from narcissistic needs and centres around her belief that the sadness of girls should be reframed as an act of political protest rather than a personal failure. (T. Tongco 2015) Here, her motivations are different from those who insistently try to control a self-image to fit the "sad" norm.

"Style in subculture is pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority'" (D. Hebdige 1979, p. 18)

Although consciously wheeling in attention through the attractiveness of the Sad Girl aesthetic, Wollen's 'Sad Girl Theory', the name she uses to define her purposes online, is an action towards refuting the connection of girls' sadness to being passive, self-involved or shallow. (fig. 4) With this she aims to uncover the patriarchal natured properties assessed to women and delivers a direct critique to the idea that women need to be happy all the time.

Kate Durbin, author of the essay 'The Teen Girl Tumblr Aesthetic', claims that "girls can teach us something about what it's like to always be seen as a thing, as less or other than all that you are, and what you can do with that position of abjection if you are brave. The aesthetic is at once purposefully campy and disarmingly earnest; artifice and vulnerability bleed together until you can't tell the two apart." (K. Durbin as cited by L. Zoladz 2014) She celebrates @SoSadToday as the perfect example of this. Whilst focussing on herself entirely and therefore almost counteracting the connotations Wollen tries to set Sad Girls free off, @SoSadToday might also make use of messages with a hidden political quality. Analysing the correlation between style and subcultures, Hebdige explores the idea that a subculture's style might solely be appreciated for its aesthetic, as art. However, he quickly moves away from this idea, stating that a subculture's style only has relevance in the context of social articulation and is always part of a system that creates meaning. (D. Hebdige 1979, p. 129)

To comprehend what Kate Durbin tries to illustrate, it's evident to look at a some of @SoSadToday's Tweets. First, through Tweets such as: "can i interest you in being obsessed with me", and "does my emotional instability turn you on?", it becomes apparent there is a clear awareness of being seen. The aspect of discarding the stereotype of the happy perfect girl is also clearly portrayed, with the Internet personality Tweeting out things like "determined to not get my life together". The same article citing Kate Durbin talks on about @SoSadToday and states "For girls who are aware that our culture expects them to be benignly happy, shiny objects—smile for me, baby—there can be a defiance in not only embracing sadness online, but cultivating a kind of ambiguity as to where the performed feeling ends and the "genuine" feeling begins." (K. Durbin as cited by L. Zoladz 2014)

Re-evaluating both Sad Girl examples, this blurring divide between private and public might be the case in the eye of the beholder, however both Sad Girls seem to be consciously aware that their online persona is ultimately a construction. Assessing Audrey Wollen's profile, she makes use of the attractiveness of the Sad Girl aesthetic, whilst using her actual content to communicate a literal political



statement against the hyper-positive demand of society. This creates a clear division between the superficial factors of her online identity (aesthetic) and the motivation of her offline-self presented in the content of her online profile.

For the anonymous personality behind @SoSadToday, her offline self and her online identity seem less separated. As a real person who started this anonymous account as an outlet for her emotions, @SoSadToday found other ways to separate her offline personality from her online character. The highly personal communication online creates the perception of a real girl that is struggling with mental health issues, and dwells in melancholy and satire. The humour she utilizes provides a wall between her supposedly feelings and the ones she communicates online. This humoristic factor is what makes her able to talk about the mental illness she is suffering from without the limitation of being connected to the negative stereotypes surrounding mental illness.

### **3. From Subculture to Mainstream**

“The cycle leading from opposition to defusion, from resistance to incorporation encloses each successive subculture.” (D. Hebdige 1979, p. 100)

Whether the motivation behind this Sad Girl subculture is to reform female stereotypes, to find an outlet and support or to gain attention, what is more important is how these girls are perceived by society, particularly other teenage girls and furthermore, how the Sad Girl subculture has grounded itself in mainstream media.

#### **Reaffirming Stereotypes**

“Everyone that exists online is part of a performance or is being performative, I don’t think [a strict version] of authenticity exists — we are mediated by technology and language... But I like the idea of Audrey Wollen performing Audrey Wollen without the space of a clearly artificial title or stage.” (A. Wollen as cited by T. Tongco 2015)

Having a serious conversation on negative emotions offline is not the same as throwing those emotions on social media. When expressing negative emotions on the Internet, or anything for that matter, it latches onto your online image. In the previous chapter I have illustrated the fast pace at which the Sad Girl gained a myriad of “added” characteristics and eventually became a stereotype, a norm on its own. No matter what the reasons are behind adopting this Sad Girl appearance, by directly linking the expressing of sad emotions to an online performance that comes with a fully extinguished style, what first seems as an innocent attempt of a teenager to belong to a safe community and talk about her problems becomes a superficial cry for attention and an act of self-pity. This combination of the superficiality society connects to style, the doubt if the girls that express this style actually experience feelings of sadness and the blurring lines between true identity and identity performance reshapes the stereotype Audrey Wollen tries to free girls off. The notion that girls who express sadness are merely looking for attention.

#### **Depressed or Trying Out a New Look?**

“They have blurred the lines between those who latch onto the dark aesthetic photos popping up, and those who are struggling with mental illness and a deeper, more pervasive kind of sadness.” (H. May 2015)

Here we have finally reached the potential danger the Sad Girl aesthetic can bring to the table. By expressing a style that attributes elements of depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses, Sad Girls use these mental illnesses as an accessory of online identity construction. This harms the legitimacy of having a mental illness and condenses it to an aesthetic that is meant to be attractive and mysterious. “There’s an undeniable allure... in embroidering “sad girls club” onto your jean jacket or reblogging an angsty post on Tumblr, which, as with any other subculture, makes for a good marketing technique.” (H. May 2015)

As I briefly described before, just as the ‘Happiness Cult’ builds a network of commodities around “being happy”, the Sad Girl subculture reduces mental illnesses to a set of things that can be bought. Both represent a culture of conspicuous consumption (D. Hebdige 1979, p. 103) that invites brands to create a market for these commodities and capitalize on the idea that mental illness is “cool”. What this also puts into action is the deconstruction of the Sad Girl subculture as a meaningful countermovement to the creation of a new stereotype that can be held up to the same standard as that of the “happy girl”. Hebdige explains that ultimately, once a subculture is recognized by people other than its members, what was once subversive, rebellious, and radical, is now contained and the resistant power of the subculture begins to die. (D. Hebdige 1979, p. 130)

### **Joking About My Mental illness**

“If I’m going to alienate you, I want to curate that alienation. I want to craft the persona that turns you off. I don’t want the real me, my vulnerabilities and humanity, to leak out and make you run. I don’t want to have needs . . . so I deflect my vulnerability into humour or ‘wise platitudes.’” (M. Broder as cited by H. Mlotek 2016)

Twitter account @SoSadToday is at the textual root of the Sad Girl stereotype. Instead of reshaping characteristics of mental illness into an aesthetic, she reworked them into funny Tweets. A Sad Girl is witty, sarcastic and bluntly satirical at times. She does not show weakness, or how she is really feeling; she dresses up her sadness in an amusing performance. The New Yorker claims that we don’t always have to say precisely what we feel in order to say something true. (H. Mlotek 2016) In this context, humour is the password to Sad Girl member club, it is the safe word to disguise the core of a real problem and the trigger word for the mainstream to start paying attention.

Using humour as a vehicle for expressing mental health problems proves to be both affective and affectively distorting. The person behind @SoSadToday claimed to use humour as a coping mechanism, a way to distance herself from her feelings and relativize them in order to feel better. Coping with reality is something it does not provide, instead it brought along an enormous following that related to her silly words and decided to express themselves in the same way. (M. Broder as cited by H. Mlotek 2016)

Humour is arguably the catalyst that brought the Sad Girl subculture and its expressing of mental health problems to the mainstream. Without having to display vulnerability and deal with the stigma around mental illnesses, everyone is now free to use words such as ‘OCD’, ‘depressed’ and

'mental' in their daily internet conversions. The appropriation of terms used in the context of mental illness led to a number of popular ways to take a mental illness and make it into something desirable. The biggest trend in sharing emotional struggles right now? Memes.

The use of memes is the first and the biggest trend to communicate mental health problems. Applying the same humorous words @SoSadToday uses to images, memes are a multifunctional outlet that fits within every social media format. (fig. 5)

Besides humour and the combination of words and images, what adds to memes' success rate is its anonymity.

"The interesting thing about memes is that if it doesn't have a watermark, you don't know where it originated." (W. Syfret 2017) The ability to share mental struggles in memes is liberating and creates an easy out from the judgement that comes with having a mental illness.

The ease to copy-paste a meme into every social media platform without having to add own input makes sharing these memes very attractive. The sharability of these word and picture combinations is extremely popular with teenagers, who are constantly on the hunt for things to define themselves by. What memes also have is a factor of "sameness", an instant connection to everyone that relates to the same meme and everyone who shared it before them. Memes have the ability to foster a sense of community that creates the feeling of not being alone, and might provide people with the strength to talk about mental illness once finding an outlet online. (W. Syfret 2017) Memes may even have the ability to open up a new conversation about mental health in general and re-assess the taboo surrounding the expression of emotional struggles without having to compete the notion of happy as the only tolerable expression of online identity.

Entering however the territory of mainstream media, this negatively toned expression in the form of memes can be seen as a direct attack on the online 'Happiness Cult' as it operates in the same place. "Pessimism is bracing and often very funny. It is also consoling, in that it relieves us of the burdens borne by the optimist: the need to insist it's getting better, the enervating search for good news, the rule-driven need to get the pointless job done." (B. Appleyard 2015) Nevertheless, by looking at pessimism as a direct opposite to positivism in the same realm of mainstream social media use, pessimism loses its power as favourable "underdog" and is treated the same as its positive counterpart. The mainstream has taken away its political potential to undo unfortunate stereotyping, and like positivity it is now just a form of attention seeking and fighting in a game for popularity. It is even arguable that this form of sharing mental health problems can no longer be seen as that. It is reduced to another commodity to be attractive to peers and be in the know of what is trending online. "The sicker and more disturbing the meme is, the more comforted I feel inside. It's like the "Oh so I'm not the only one" or "There are people who are more fucked than I am" sort of comfort. I feel memes are an anaesthetic for us, the underachievers." (A. D. Barman as cited by S. Krishnan 2017) Finding pleasure in the comparing of misery to that of others creates the complete opposite effect of the opportunity to engage in further meaningful conversations on mental health I described before. It appoints instead of a taboo, a certain desire to having mental health problems and it is this movement transcending to the mainstream that increased the desire to relate to these types of memes and thus treats mental illness on the same level as being popular online.

### **Teens and the Realms of the Internet**

"I make memes instead of seeing a therapist which would be funny if it wasn't true." (J. Nathanson as cited by W. Syfret 2017)

Besides looking at the positives and negatives of sharing mental health problems in a mainstream setting, it is as important to consider if this is an unavoidable effect of the digitalisation of teenagers' lives and society as a whole.

Using Danah Boyd's extensive research on the social media use of teenagers, I will try to illustrate the correlation between this glamorisation of mental illnesses and the sharing behaviour of teenagers.

Having discussed the identity construction online by both the sad and happy equivalent of the Internet, it seems the emergence of social media developed both an opportunity and an obligation to consciously create an online self. Discussing the context of social media and its use by teenagers, Boyd discovered that teenagers chose to represent themselves in different ways on different sites with the expectation of different audiences and different norms and argues that sometimes these choices are conscious attempts by individuals seeking to control their self-presentation. This need for control comes from a lack of agency in the offline world. Referring to the Internet, she mentions that "In one realm, however, their power is supreme; they control their evaluations of one another. That is, the kind of power they do have is status power: the power to create their own status systems based on their own criteria." (D. Boyd 2014, p. 38, 141) Sherry Turkle suggests that "the internet could—and would—free people of the burdens of their "material"—or physically embodied—identities, enabling them to become a better version of themselves." (S. Turkle as cited by D. Boyd 2014, p. 37) This sounds significantly accurate in the context of the prevalingly happy self-presentation Instagram and suggests this process of happiness sharing is an expected result of the nature of the internet. Boyd even addresses the need to be perceived as happy online by stating "They [teenagers] may want to be seen as cool among their peers, even if adults would deem their behaviour inappropriate. Teens may wish to be viewed as confident and happy, even when they're facing serious depression or anxiety." (D. Boyd 2014, p. 49)

Using Goffman to further explain the idea of online identity construction, Boyd states that "what we convey to others is a matter of what we choose to share in order to make a good impression and also what we unintentionally reveal as a by-product of who we are and how we react to others." (D. Boyd 2014, p. 48) This need for teenagers to communicate who they are, and more importantly how they are feeling results in a constant strife to share with their peers without having to give away too much. Boyd describes this as youth's new definition of privacy and uses the example of sharing emotions through song lyrics to create a distance and the ability to only share with peers who relate and thus understand. (D. Boyd 2014, p. 66) This brings us to the sharing of mental health issues.

As teenagers find new ways of creating privacy from authority figures, they forge messages that are uncomprehensive for these figures and thus get misinterpreted. The inaccurate perceiving of teenagers and their online expressions by society leads to a mistrust of teenagers towards authority figures and therefore they feel the need to share their struggles online. "By imagining teens as balls of uncontrollable hormones, society has systematically taken agency away from youth over the past century. The current state of mental health infrastructure is so fractured that it often results in children being doubly oppressed." (D. Boyd 2014, p.95) Boyd continues saying that "The structured and restrictive conditions that comprise the lives of many teens provides little room for them to explore these issues, but social media gives them a platform and a space where they can make up for what's lost." (D.

Boyd 2014, p. 95) When teenagers with mental health issues feel isolated in a society that does not take them seriously, they turn to social media to display their pain to the world. Their desire to be in public leads to an open display, whilst their need for privacy against authority figures makes them express their struggles in the form of encoded messages or as an anonymous online persona.

Whether encoded or anonymously posted, teenagers use their online expressions as a vehicle for status. Boyd searches this need for status in celebrity culture. "Teenagers learn to engage in acts of drama just as they learn different tactics for acquiring attention from others. One of the ways that they develop these sensibilities is through celebrity culture." (D. Boyd 2014, p. 147) Drama is seen in our society as normalcy through popular and celebrity culture, and whilst drama is being popularised, teenagers mirror this idea in their social media interactions. In this way, attention becomes a commodity and drama becomes an aspect of everyday life. Combining the sharing of drama and mental illnesses, a very important issue reveals itself. Having explored the dangers of the sharing of emotional struggling online, what is perhaps most problematic in this context is the blurring boundaries it creates between being sad and having a mental illness. Although clearly not the same, teenagers now seem to express them in the same way, and more notably they express them to gain status without considering this is morally incorrect.

To illustrate this I will return to the example of the meme. Despite the possibility memes provide to share mental health problems without involving stigma, memes that illustrate a form of emotional struggle are simultaneously used as vehicle for status. When these memes use terms like 'depression' and 'anxiety', they refer directly to mental illness, whether this meme is spread by a person that actually suffers from a mental illness or a person that just uses the desirable factor of sadness to gain popularity. This contributes to the overall idea of society that sharing emotional struggle online is just a teenage cry for attention and belongs to the "normal" display of teenagers' online image. This does not only create more stigma and negative stereotyping surrounding having a mental illness, it also strengthens the glamorisation of mental illnesses online.

Although status is the main motivation behind teenagers' sharing, Boyd describes the ability and possible desire for teenagers to politically express themselves online and she describes memes as a way of doing so. "The production and distribution of internet memes is a common form of self-expression, but it can also be a form of political speech. (D. Boyd 2014, p. 210) Here in turn, the sharing of memes that talk about emotional struggle can be looked at as something positive as it shows the potential of teenagers to provide a countermovement against the taboo surrounding the sharing of negative emotions and possibly creates opportunity to uplift the stigmatization surrounding having a mental illness. Arguably however, this political ability of mental illness memes can be shut down by society's perceiving of teenagers as apolitical. "Overwhelmingly, public leaders and journalists deem many actions that teens and young adults take in the name of protest as illegitimate." (D. Boyd 2014, p. 209)

## Conclusion

"Should an emotion like sadness—dangerously close to the sensitive territory of mental illness—ever be expressed through something as frivolous as taste?" (A. Hines 2015)

Within this paper, I aimed to determine how the glamorisation of mental illnesses online came to being. Focussing on the shift from mental illness as a taboo subject to mental illness as an accessory of online identity construction, I divided my research process into three steps. First, I approached the portrayal of happiness online as the norm. Then I looked at the Sad Girl subculture as a possible act of rebellion and countermovement against the online 'Happiness Cult'. Lastly, I analysed the process of how the Sad Girl subculture entered the mainstream. Connecting this three steps-process with the sharing of mental illness, I looked at the online 'Happiness Cult' as oppression of the expression of mental health issues. When reaching the topic of Sad Girl subculture, I analysed its expression of sadness and ultimately mental illness as an establishment of online identity. Conclusively, I examined how this expressing of sadness entering the mainstream caused a shift in ideas, stereotyping and treatment of mental illness. I came to the conclusion that the answer to my research question is one that includes many factors and that these factors are ultimately stuck in a game of cause-and-effect.

Establishing a norm that is based on happiness and expressed through commodities as a form of identity construction, eventually leads to a subculture that rebels against hegemony through the expression of the complete opposite: sadness. Within the realm of being sad belongs the gradation of suffering from a mental illness and so, through basing a subculture, a construction which equally relies on the expression of online identity through commodification, having a mental illness becomes something desirable within this subculture.

Hebdige explains that when a subculture develops its own stereotype through style and thus commodities, it eventually enters the mainstream and loses much of its initial meaning. In this context, the popularisation of the Sad Girl aesthetic and the use of humour to express mental health problems developed to the adoption by the masses. As the original aim of the Sad Girl subculture was to create an alternative world where girls could express their emotional struggles, now, the motivation behind the expression of sadness focusses mainly on the gaining of status and is subsequently perceived as a narcissistic act for attention. This counteracts the potential for the subculture to uplift the stigmatisation surrounding mental illness and instead dismisses the seriousness of having a mental illness as well as it re-establishes the idea that a person who expresses mental health problems is merely looking for attention.

It is evident that the perceiving of society is more important than the motivation of those sharing. However, moving past the negative effects it has on the stereotyping of mental illness sufferers, what it does do is provoke society to think about mental illness and make teenagers who have no one to share their mental health problems with feel they are able to share online, without having to be ashamed. As Danah Boyd explains, there is an overall lack of validation towards teenagers' feelings and in the context of mental illness this becomes problematic. It is therefore important that teenagers find a venue to share their mental health struggles, in order to feel that they are heard, understood and most importantly, not alone. As our current generation of teenagers is linked to a high rate of mental health problems and spend the majority of its free time online (C. Barr 2016), this dialogue will most likely be held on the Internet. This illustrates that although the glamorisation of mental illness is inherently problematic and causes new negative stereotyping, the ability for teenagers to share their emotional struggles online is fundamental and shouldn't be treated as something wrong or insignificant for that matter.

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## Appendix

### Images

Fig. 1 – Instagram post of Audrey Wollen



Fig. 2 – Instagram post of Audrey Wollen



Fig. 3 – Instagram post of Audrey Wollen




audreywollen Follow

audreywollen [insert low res iphone pic of flowery bruises on girl's ass to imply mildly deviant sexual behavior while still maintaining an air of feminized vulnerability, internet friendly pseudo-empowerment in soft blue tones]

load more comments

petermakebish poor little baby @audreywollen

ohrasberries 🍷🍷

blakelightragedy @imanilove1994

xena\_bianca @bradclifford

nadirerenler 🔥

kitty.vomit This acc speaks to me on a spiritual level @ollivi.a

lilitheft @gertch\_caption

king\_1359 🙏🙏

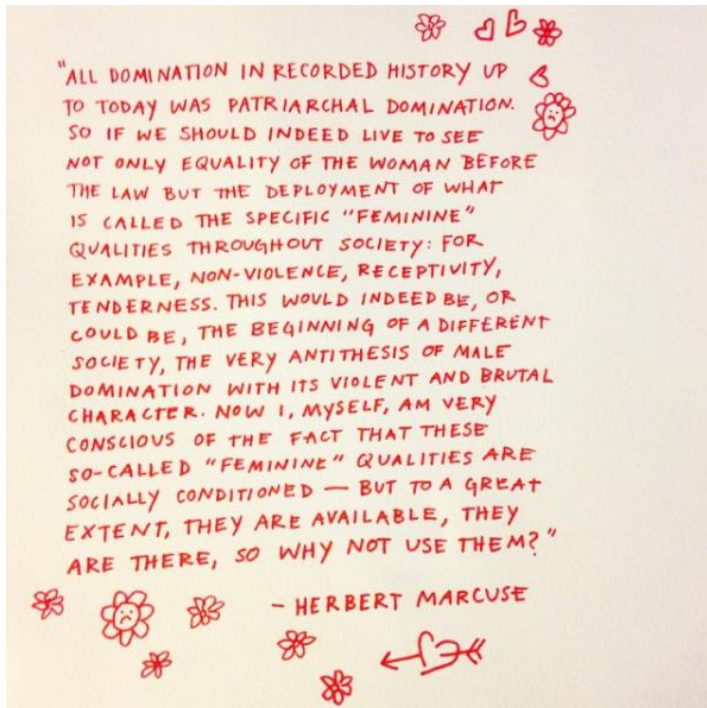
 

**1,085 likes**

JANUARY 24, 2015

Add a comment...

Fig. 4 – Instagram post of Audrey Wollen




audreywollen Follow

audreywollen use what u have been given: crying, clothes, sexual objectification, motherhood, makeup.

disgusta 🍷🍷🍷

amberwsmith Yes.

cashidiamondz @tayarkenny

sinalivio 🍷🍷

moranmorans2 @greyishilly 뭐라는지는모르겠지만 너의단어가보여 페미닌

tatemh Crying, especially 🍷🍷

lezanya @moonfattie grrrl power #matriarchy

michelle\_agresti @racheljr

michelle\_agresti @caseyhartnett

itm3pho3nix @sonjamdp 🍷🍷🍷

jillianduke @laurensayshello3 Herland clap hark

**414 likes**

DECEMBER 23, 2014

Add a comment...

Fig. 5 – "Sad meme" that makes use of the term 'anxiety'

When you chillin but then remember that you have anxiety.

