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## The Paradox of “Sad Girl” Music

Amelia Wang

With technological advancements and the growing influence of social media, music has become a popular and highly accessible commodity worldwide. An effect of music consumption growth has been the expansion of genres, subgenres, and lyrical content. Specifically, female artists centering their musical work around vulnerable and melancholic themes, such as toxic relationships, mental health, or societal expectations of feminine identities, have led to the emergence of “sad girl” music subgenres. As detailed by a featured article published by The Recording Academy, responsible for the U.S. music industry’s acclaimed Grammy Awards, and written by writer Ilana Kaplan, “sad girl” music is also reflective of society’s “trauma[,]...mental and emotional toll of isolation and anxiety” (Kaplan). Listeners of “sad girl” music may feel a sense of affinity with the artists’ vulnerability and trauma. However, the “sad girl” music genre raises questions regarding its messaging in relation to postfeminist and enlightened sexist frameworks, the commodification of trauma, and its societal implications.

This research paper will assess the representations of female vulnerability and trauma in “sad girl” music and listeners’ role in maintaining the commodification of femininity, trauma, and marginalized experiences. To achieve the aforementioned goals, postfeminism and enlightened sexism will be introduced as frameworks to assess musical works within the “sad girl” music genre. Specifically, the musical works of Lana Del Rey and Phoebe Bridgers, prominent artists in the “sad girl” music genre, will be analyzed under postfeminism and enlightened sexism frameworks to reveal nuanced contributions these representations have in today’s feminist discourse, both positive and negative. “Sad girl” music’s intended messaging will also be highlighted. Additionally, Pierre Bourdieu’s framework on cultural capital will be

utilized to reveal how the consumption of “sad girl” music commodifies trauma. The harms of such trauma commodification will be presented, urging readers to value the importance of incorporating recognition of the potential harms of consuming “sad girl” music. Through this research paper, readers are encouraged to assess and reflect upon their affinities with “sad girl” music and how consuming such media may impact their understanding of marginalized trauma experiences.

Since the late 19th century, feminism’s approach to achieving gender equality legally and socially has evolved, from early campaigns focusing on women’s suffrage, reshaping society’s limiting expectations and views of women, to the development of feminist discourse emphasizing individualism and autonomy. With feminism’s shifting framework and media digitization, postfeminist ideology emerged during the late 20th century. As expressed by Professor Sarah Banet-Weiser in her piece from the journal *Feminist Media Histories*, “core features of postfeminism includ[e] an emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency, a resistance to interrogating structural gendered inequalities, and a renewed focus on a woman’s body as a site of liberation” (153). However, postfeminism’s focus on freedom of choice and agency is distinct from that of third wave feminism in addressing reproduction rights; it rests upon “the active disavowal of feminism as a necessary politics” (Banet-Weiser 153). Postfeminism’s focus on choice and agency is underpinned by a deliberate rejection of feminism as a social and political necessity. Essentially, postfeminism posits that feminism has already accomplished its objectives and that society should progress towards a so-called “post-feminist” phase.

To illustrate postfeminism’s workings in modern media and entertainment, feminist scholar Susan Douglas examines media representations of women in her book *Enlightened*

*Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism's Work Is Done*. Douglas highlights female characters on popular television shows, such as “don't-even-think-about-messing-with-me Dr. Bailey on *Grey's Anatomy*, ... Geena Davis as the first female president in...*Commander in Chief*,” and questions whether influential “hot pants”-wearing, “girl power”-advocating UK girl-group, the Spice Girls, were really “a vehicle for feminism” (Douglas 1-3). The previous examples reflect the postfeminist agenda, where women are portrayed as autonomous, free-thinkers that have the capacity to hold roles in a variety of influential, historically male-dominated positions. Postfeminism's emphasis on women's autonomy suggests that artists like the Spice Girls, when being presented in a sexual manner, choose to do so themselves. Women's agency in their sexualization reclaims power from others and restores it to women themselves, rather than being the objects of others', often men's, sexualization.

However, enlightened sexism questions and scrutinizes whether these postfeminist media portrayals of women truly advance feminist goals. Douglas expresses that the aforementioned examples “assure girls and women, repeatedly, that women's liberation is a fait accompli and that we are stronger, more successful, more sexually in control, more fearless, and more held in awe than we actually are” (5). In essence, postfeminism encourages oversaturation in media representation of powerful women. Such representations promote an oversimplified message that women have achieved liberation when, in reality, social and systemic barriers still impede women's access to opportunities to achieve equal footing with men. Moreover, Douglas emphasizes that postfeminist media and popular culture simultaneously reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes, presenting such sexism as irony or satire because society has achieved feminism and we can recognize that this is not what we truly think of women. She refers to this phenomenon as enlightened sexism, which is more insidious and difficult to detect

than overt forms of sexism. Enlightened sexism highlights the danger of accepting postfeminist portrayals as truly feminist and reminds us of the work that still needs to be done to achieve true gender equality.

Much of the emergent “sad girl” music genre, when analyzed through a postfeminist lens, may reveal instances of enlightened sexism. Take, for example, American singer-songwriter Lana Del Rey’s songs “Ride” and “A&W.” In “Ride,” Lana expresses that despite the “war in [her] mind,” alluding to all the emotional turmoil she’s experienced, she desires to “just ride” along the journey of life (4:58-5:07). Opening the music video with a melancholic, snuffle-filled monologue, Lana reflects upon her experiences of being a mistress in relationships: “Because I was born to be the other woman / Who belonged to no one / Who belonged to everyone” (2:44-2:54). Through her raw and honest lyricism, Lana Del Rey presents her devaluing experiences of being a mistress as a source of trauma and pain, reflecting a postfeminist emphasis on women’s emotional vulnerability. Yet, in “A&W,” short for American Whore, Lana’s attitude towards her sexual encounters with men shifts. She describes a sexual encounter with a man in a matter-of-fact and transactional manner: “Call him up, “Come into my bedroom” / Ended up, we fuck on the hotel floor / It’s not about havin’ someone to love me anymore / This is the experience of bein’ an American whore” (Lana Del Rey 1:13-1:33). Her delivery and transactional description of a sexual rendezvous with a man displays Lana’s acceptance of being objectified and commodified as a “whore.”

Lana’s lyricism could be seen as empowering under the postfeminist framework but also unhealthy under enlightened sexism. Her shift in attitude may reflect the postfeminist idea that women can and should choose their own sexual experiences. Under postfeminism, Lana embracing whore, a derogatory description of women that are involved with transactional sex for

the pleasure of others, and her vulnerability and acceptance are reclamatory and suggest that society has moved past condemning women for choosing to be more sexually liberal. Lana's choice to share her liberal sexual experiences displays a level of autonomy and control over the narrative of herself she hopes to be presented to the public. It should be acknowledged, however, that perhaps Lana is only able to have agency over her sexual narrative due to her status as a white woman. Under enlightened sexism, her lyrical narrative encourages women to, as she has, accept unhealthy relationship dynamics with men, and promotes defining one's self-worth based on heterosexual relationships with men. To women of color, Lana's ownership and agency over her sexual experience is highly unachievable as women of color are often sexually exploited at rates much higher than those of white women (Thompson). Furthermore, the lyrics "He hit me and it felt like a kiss / I can hear violins, violins / Give me all of that ultraviolence" in "Ultraviolence" showcase Lana's romanticization of interpersonal violence, which can be extremely damaging (Lana Del Rey 1:16-1:28). These lyrics push the narrative that women should accept or even enjoy violence from their partners, trivializing the emotional and physical trauma experienced by many women as a result of such violence. Language such as "belonged to no one" and "belonged to everyone" in "Ride," and "havin' someone to love me" in "A&W" consistently presents women as individuals that exist only in relation to others, oftentimes men. As Douglas argues, the contradictory portrayal of women in Lana's lyricism can reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuates the objectification of women, though difficult to detect. Both postfeminism and enlightened sexism's presence in Lana's lyricism present the nuanced and controversial nature of Lana's presentation of feminine trauma and vulnerability in her music.

The duality between progressive, reclamatory feminist messaging and enlightened sexist messaging is also reflected through “sad girl” music icon Phoebe Bridgers’s lyrics. Bridgers draws upon her turbulent relationship dynamics with male figures in her life to find inspiration for her lyrics. In “Kyoto”, a song that addresses her complex relationship with her substance abuser-father, Bridgers sings, “I’m gonna kill you / If you don’t beat me to it” (0:36-0:44). Bridgers expresses the conflict between the simultaneous intense hatred towards her father due to his absent nature throughout her upbringing, reflected through her non-literal desire to “kill” him, and the love and care she feels for him, reflected through her worries of her father committing suicide. This highlights the conflicting feelings of love and hate that can exist in abusive relationships. Bridgers's lyricism in “Motion Sickness” reveals similar tumultuous sentiments she experienced due to her relationship with abusive, 20-year-older, former partner, Ryan Adams. The lyrics “I hate you for what you did / And I miss you like a little kid ... I can hardly feel anything / I hardly feel anything at all” conveys Bridgers’s emotional conflict between despising Adams as a source of her trauma, yet still missing him (Bridgers 0:08-0:34). Her emotional instability is further emphasized by claiming to not feel anything despite expressing strong emotions of hate and nostalgia. Bridgers’s vulnerability in sharing her contradictory, complex, and intense emotions as a result of toxic relationships with male figures in her life can be seen as empowering, destigmatizing, and affirming for women with similar experiences. Alternatively, it can be argued that her paradoxical lyrics and emotions reinforce stereotypes about women as irrational and overly-emotional. Nevertheless, her choice to incorporate her trauma into her music to discuss often stigmatized experiences gives Bridgers the ability to shape her narrative and bring power into her own hands.

Although “sad girl” music has been criticized for perpetuating enlightened sexist narratives, it can also be a powerful means to destigmatize female vulnerability and trauma. The genre’s pain-ridden lyrics that address topics such as traumatic relationships, female sexualization and objectification, and emotional trauma reflect a nuanced and often overlooked aspect of women’s experiences. When asked if she was ever concerned about her lyrics’ transparency and honesty during an interview with MTV News, Bridgers responds that her lyrical process is “cathartic” (7:33-7:34) and she views it as “trauma representation” (0:15-0:17). She elaborates, “If I didn’t write about personal stuff, I would be robbing myself of the experience of talking to fans with mirrored experiences.” (Bridgers 7:53-8:01). Bridgers’s vulnerability encourages open dialogue around trauma-related experiences, and creates a sense of community among fans with similar experiences. As detailed in an article from the peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal *Violence Against Women*, women subject to gender-based abuse often experience heightened mental health risks, including moderate to severe PTSD and depression (Mechanic, et al.). The intangible nature of psychological trauma as a result of abuse renders it more nuanced and subject to stigmatization, making it all the more important to create space for these women to reclaim, process, and destigmatize their experiences. Thus, Bridgers and other “sad girl” artists’ focus on trauma in music makes space for women with similar experiences in mainstream media.

Under consumerism and capitalism, regardless of artists’ messaging and intentions behind their vulnerability, their trauma is inevitably commodified. As detailed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital envisions cultural knowledge as a form of currency or capital that bolsters our social standing, and therefore our life experiences and opportunities (16). Music reflects Bourdieu’s cultural capital in the embodied and objectified states. Cultural



capital as the objectified state includes “material objects and media, such as writings, paintings” that are “transmissible in its materiality” (Bourdieu 19). The monetary capital expended on consuming music, through attending concerts and buying albums, reflects their cultural competency and ability to engage in popular culture. Additionally, the consumption of music also constitutes an embodied state of cultural capital, which is obtained through “a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time... which must be invested...by the investor” (Bourdieu 18). By consuming “sad girl” music, listeners display their knowledge and that they are versed in stigmatized topics, showcasing their emotional sensitivity and aptitude to engage in conversations about such issues. Thus, artists’ trauma is commodified through the cultural value placed upon consuming music, and the benefits listeners reap from consuming trauma-induced content.

The commodification of “sad girl” music does not mean that consuming “sad girl” music will necessarily result in heightened cultural sensitivity to its reclamatory, feminist messaging; listeners are prone to falling into the trap of enlightened sexism. Catherine Liu, American cultural theorist, and film and media studies professor at UC Irvine, highlights the dangers of trauma commodification. When trauma is commodified, a culture where “suffering at the individual level [is taken] as a privileged site of political struggle” forms, which then “standardizes and mass markets individual suffering” (Liu). When these “sad girl” music female artists’ sufferings are consumed as a form of cultural capital, listeners are prone to neglect the gravity and messaging behind their trauma. Neglect towards social and “collective reckoning with trauma and human suffering” can occur, and the needs of women that struggle with similar traumatic experiences, including the artists themselves, to heal are diminished (Liu). The messaging behind “sad girl” music, as seen through the examples of Lana and Bridgers’s

lyricism, is often an individualistic expression to process and reclaim their trauma as a form of awareness-raising. Though in combination with enlightened feminism and trauma commodification, listeners may not take away the intended messaging behind “sad girl” music, but rather perceive such expressions of trauma as an overgeneralized, enlightened sexist portrayal of trauma.

Thus, the onus of responsible consumption of trauma-induced “sad girl” music rests on listeners. The responsible consumption of “sad girl” music requires a delicate balance between appreciating the lyrical expression of female artists and recognizing the social implications of trauma commodification. While it may not be necessary for listeners to actively think about the potential harm caused by the casual consumption of such music, it is essential to acknowledge the potential neglect of the real needs of those affected by trauma. As emphasized by this paper, the potential for listeners to engage in such music in a purely postfeminist view is possible and can be reductive to the impacts of trauma. Ultimately, it is up to listeners to make conscious choices about their consumption habits and to be mindful of the impact of their actions on others. By doing so, we can create a more empathetic and responsible society that values the voices of all individuals, including those who have experienced trauma. Practicing increased awareness of “sad girl” music consumption, when it comes to an indulgence in others’ trauma, will allow us to consider how such consumption may affect others’ realities and how we view marginalized trauma experiences.

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