“sad girlies how are we doing rn??”: Queer Youth’s Affective Engagements with ‘Sad Girl Music’ on TikTok

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Abstract

"sad girlies how are we doing rn??": Queer Youth's Affective Engagements with 'Sad Girl Music' on TikTok

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In recent years, TikTok has regularly been flooded with videos of mostly young queer women engaging with so-called 'sad girl music': a contested term referring to music that explores 'ordinary' sad feelings. This thesis examines sad girl music in the platform context, focusing on how identity constructions, emotions, and especially sadness, are mobilized in queer youths' engagements with the music on TikTok. Drawing on affect theory, political economy, and fandom studies, I conduct a critical discourse analysis of 222 TikToks collected using the platform's sound feature. My findings indicate that, in a context where the platformization of music is increasingly shaping discourses around music and emphasizing identity and mood as central to music consumption, TikTok facilitates new avenues for identity-construction and community-formation for young queer people in fandom spaces who utilize the platform's affordances to subvert and queer mainstream trends and fandom practices. I further show how engagements with sad girl music reveal queer youths' disillusionment with a future they are nonetheless continuing to yearn for. Expressions of sadness thus function as a way for queer youth to understand and process their sadness within broader socio-political contexts, allowing them to connect with others and potentially transform the inertia of waiting into political action. This thesis contributes to understandings of how queer fandom practices make use of and are (re)shaped by the TikTok platform, as well as understandings of the role of emotions in platformed music fandoms where collective experiences of sadness and shared affective investments can facilitate engagements with politics.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On January 18, 2023, the indie rock supergroup boygenius, made up of musicians Julien Baker, Phoebe Bridgers, and Lucy Dacus, announced their debut studio album and released the first three songs. Scrolling through my TikTok For You Page (FYP) on that day, I came across an avalanche of videos of mainly young women and queer people reacting to the announcement and the new songs, often making references to sadness and expressing the emotions they felt when hearing the songs. One such video, set to the TikTok sound of one of the songs, depicts a young feminine presenting person filming themself walking down the street, overlaid with the text "sad girlies how are doing rn [right now]??" (cf. Figure 1-1). Meanwhile, another video's text reads, "it's a big day for queer people everywhere."

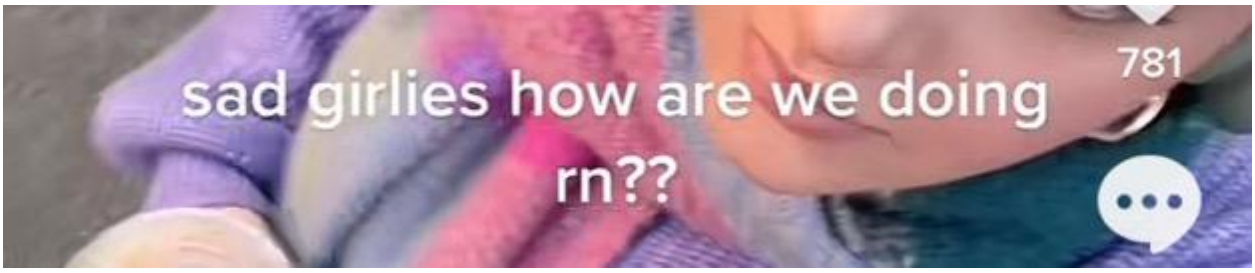

Figure 1-1: "sad girlies how are we doing rn??"

When I, like so many others stuck at home due to pandemic lockdowns, first downloaded the short-video social media platform TikTok in March 2020, I did not really know what to expect, but was simply looking for some distraction. With the FYP algorithm quickly picking up on my interests, I started coming across a huge number of TikToks by young queer people engaging with what is colloquially called "sad girl music" (Zoladz, 2022): a simultaneously derisive and empowering term referring to music that explores "everyday longing and disappointment" (Tolentino, 2018). Having listened to artists like Mitski, Lucy Dacus, and Julien Baker for a few years at that point, I was intrigued by the ways in which queer people on TikTok were using the platform to relate the music to their own experiences, their emotions and mental health, their queerness, as well as to the socio-political context they live in.

In a context where discourses around mental health and sadness are increasingly prominent within mainstream popular discourses (Thelandersson, 2023), and where fandom practices that were long disparaged are starting to be re-evaluated in a different light (J. Williams, 2024), queer youth's sad girl music TikToks present a curious intersection of discourses around emotions, fandom, queerness, social media, and broader societal and cultural contexts. Exploring these

connections, this thesis examines sad girl music in the platform context, focusing on how identity constructions, emotions, and especially sadness, are mobilized in queer youths' engagements with the music on TikTok. Specifically, this project poses the following research questions:

1. How is sad girl music conceptualized within the context of the music industry and how are discourses and understandings of it shaped by the platformization of music?
2. How are queer youth engaging with sad girl music on TikTok and in what ways does TikTok facilitate these engagements?
3. What are the emotions, affects, discourses, and concerns present in sad girl music TikToks, how are these expressed, and what do they *do*? How do these discourses, affects, and concerns, and particularly the focus on sadness present in sad girl music TikToks relate to broader societal contexts?

Drawing on affect theory, political economy, and fandom studies, this thesis conducts a critical discourse analysis of 222 TikToks collected using the platform's sound feature, and takes the popular Spotify-generated "sad girl starter pack" playlist as a case study on the platformization of music. In a first step, this thesis shows that discourses and mainstream understandings of sad girl music and its listeners are shaped by an interplay of platform representations and online discourses. My findings indicate that, in a context where music streaming platforms are increasingly impacting discourses around music and emphasizing identity as central to music consumption, TikTok facilitates new avenues for identity construction and community formation for young queer people in fandom spaces, who utilize the platform's affordances to subvert and queer mainstream trends and fandom practices. I further show how engagements with sad girl music reveal queer youths' disillusionment with a future they are nonetheless continuing to yearn for. Expressions of sadness thus function as a way for queer youth to understand and process their sadness within broader socio-political contexts, allowing them to connect with others and potentially transform the inertia of waiting into political action. This thesis enhances understandings of how queer fandom practices make use of and are (re)shaped by the TikTok platform, as well as to understandings of the role of emotions and affects in platformed music fandoms where collective experiences of sadness and shared affective investments can facilitate engagements with politics. By untangling the specific sphere of sad girl music TikToks, it provides avenues for studying online cultures through the lens of affect theory and contributes to scholarly discourses in online music cultures, fandom studies, TikTok research, as well as to broader

discourses around affects, emotions, and mental health. Overarchingly, this research highlights the increasing connections between fandom, queer identity constructions, emotions, and political engagements in the platform context.

In this first introductory chapter, I provide a brief introduction to sad girl music, clarifying my usage of the somewhat controversial term, and explain my decision to focus this project on boygenius and Mitski. I then outline the core theories of political economy, affect, and queer theory and how they guide my analysis, before moving on to my methodological approaches that incorporate TikTok-specific digital-research methods and critical (technocultural) discourse analysis. Finally, this introduction closes by providing an overview of the following chapters.

Sad Girl Music: A Term, a Genre, a Discourse

For my thesis to address my research questions, it is first necessary to provide an introduction to the 'sad girl music' term, particularly as its use has at times sparked much discourse and criticism and it does not constitute an official music genre. As such, defining sad girl music is not an easy task. The term is flexible, vague, often criticized, and its origins are not clearly determinable. Nonetheless, the most common use is as an informal descriptor of music by mostly female musicians, many of whom are queer, that makes reference to emotions, and particularly negative emotions. Specifically, the term is most often used to describe music and lyrics abounding with emotion, vulnerability, ideas about normative conceptions of happiness, and an "awareness that the world is not a hospitable or fair place for anyone who refuses to serve the interests of the patriarchy" (Garcia-Furtado, 2022).

Due to the lack of a fixed definition, there are no clear boundaries within which artists, music genres, and timeframes can be included within the term 'sad girl music.' In attempting to trace the emergence of music that fits with the broad description, some critics and writers go back to previous artists such as Fiona Apple and Alanis Morissette as first examples of artists whose music can be considered as sad girl music (Garcia-Furtado, 2022). While these artists' songs often featured introspections on sadness and their place in society, their commercial success and the music industry's desire to profit from them also meant this kind of music was boxed into one specific category that sometimes diminished the individual song's messages in favour of marketing strategies (Garcia-Furtado, 2022; Nicholas, 2023). I will return to these generalizations and the commodification of (female musicians') emotions by the music industry in the third chapter.

In the current context, the artists most often associated with sad girl music are, among others, Julien Baker, Phoebe Bridgers, Lucy Dacus, and Mitski, most of whom are working within the indie rock and indie folks genres (Geisel, 2021). Though bigger names such as Adele, Billie Eilish, or Taylor Swift are sometimes also related to sad girl music, the focus is usually on the former group of artists. Taking up similar themes to Fiona Apple and Alanis Morissette, they "collectively evolved the style to also articulate what it's like living in a world on the brink of climate (and various other kinds of) collapse" (Garcia-Furtado, 2022).

While the blurry boundaries of sad girl music make it difficult to determine a clear size of listenership, most of the artists mentioned are in the range of a few million monthly listeners on Spotify and are thus reaching significant audiences, as also indicated by the popularity of their songs on TikTok. Over the past years, boygenius, the supergroup bringing together Baker, Bridgers, and Dacus, has particularly gained in popularity with the release of their first full-length album *the record*, successful tour of North America and Europe, and by winning three awards at the 66th Annual Grammy Awards in February 2024: Best Alternative Music Album for *the record*, Best Rock Song, and Best Rock Performance for "Not Strong Enough" (Grammy Awards, n.d.). Similarly, Mitski, following her critically acclaimed fifth studio album *Be the Cowboy* in 2018, gained wider recognition through her collaboration on the song "This Is a Life" (2022) from the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once,* which was nominated for Best Original Song at the 2023 Academy Awards (Lang & Moreau, 2023). In 2023, her song "My Love is Mine All Mine" from her seventh studio album *The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We* went viral on TikTok, leading to her first entry on the Billboard Hot 100 and her most commercially successful song to date (Snapes, 2023).

Nonetheless, within the male-dominated music industry, the music's discussion of emotions has often led to it being dismissed for its sentimentality (Aitken, 2021). The artistry of songwriting is diminished through assumptions that female musicians are writing purely from a personal, autobiographical perspective, reducing their work solely to the realm of personal experiences and hence as 'less valuable' (Cills, 2018; Lauletta, 2023; Schnipper, 2018). The highly gendered term 'sad girl music' itself may also invoke condescending narratives similar to discussions of teenage fangirls who are regarded as silly and whose tastes are not to be taken seriously (Tiffany, 2022). Multiple artists associated with the genre have criticized the term in press interviews. For example, Dacus, Baker, and Bridgers of boygenius have pointed to the double

standard it creates where women's disclosure of emotions is always interpreted as sadness instead of emotionality more broadly while similar music by men does not get attributed the same kind of label but is instead "applauded for their brilliance" (Geisel, 2021). The name of their band boygenius makes reference to this double standard by indicating how "men are taught to be entitled to space and that their ideas should be heard because they're great ideas and women are taught the opposite" (Read, 2018). In the artists' view, this reduction of emotionality to sadness makes emotion palatable but powerless at the same time (Patel, 2023), taking agency away from the artists and turning their emotions into a commodity.

Despite these criticisms, the term is still widely used, both by platforms and commercial entities as I explore in my analysis of the Spotify-created "sad girl starter pack" playlist in the third chapter, and by creators on TikTok. Considering this ongoing presence of the term and the lack of a clear alternative, I continue using the term sad girl music to encompass both the music commonly associated with it, and the context and discourses it exists within.

Defining the Scope: Focus on Boygenius & Mitski

This project focuses on Mitski and on the band boygenius. The decision to focus on these artists stems from their popularity on TikTok, their own discussions of the sad girl label in press interviews, as well as their music's explicit and implicit engagements with conceptions of happiness, mental health, and social inequalities. Further, their different positionalities and distinctive engagements with queerness and race allow me to specifically examine the music and TikToks in the context of social inequalities.

Baker, Bridgers, and Dacus are each solo artists whose music has been associated with the sad girl music genre, despite their objections. Julien Baker, who self-identifies as a lesbian and a Christian, makes indie rock music that often addresses addiction, Christianity, and mental illness (Geffen, 2017). Phoebe Bridgers' music mainly falls into the indie folk genre and her song-writing has been described as candid and emotionally honest (Sodomosky, 2017). Lucy Dacus first gained popularity with her debut album *No Burden* (2016) and her subsequent albums *Historian* (2018) and *Home Video* (2021a) were similarly praised for their strong lyricism that addresses themes of loss, (queer) love, faith, and nostalgia (Geffen, 2018; Thomas, 2021).

In 2018, the three artists came together as the supergroup boygenius, the formation of which they have described as a sort of accident (Read, 2018). After having been fans of each other's work and meeting individually, they were scheduled to tour together and decided to

collectively record a song as promotional material, but ended up forming a band and releasing their critically-acclaimed self-produced EP (boygenius, 2018b; Read, 2018). In 2023, they released their first full-length studio album *the record* (boygenius, 2023c) to widespread critical acclaim and embarked on a headlining tour (Barshad, 2023).

All three members of boygenius identify as queer and have been outspoken about their political beliefs, regularly platforming social issues on social media, in interviews, and in their music. Bringing together their musical and lyrical abilities, "*the record* asks important questions about faith, death, trust, and relationships, but for once, they come from minds that believe that women and trans and queer people and people of color are people, that people deserve basic income and a job and a home, that we should be allowed to live" (McMenamim, 2023). While not all engagements with the music on TikTok explicitly address queerness and politics, it is the combination of these themes with the emotionality typical of sad girl music that makes boygenius a particularly interesting group to focus on for my thesis.

The second focus of my research is 32-year-old Japanese-American singer-songwriter Mitski, who had her breakthrough in 2014 with her third studio album *Bury Me at Makeout Creek*, and whose subsequent albums *Puberty 2* (2016), *Be the Cowboy* (2018), *Laurel Hell* (2022), and *The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We* (2023) were all met with critical acclaim. Her music is known for raw depictions of emotions (Jung, 2022) which are often combined with upbeat music and rhythms. Her songs reveal feelings of longing for objects of desire, whether they be love, money, happiness, a certain career, for a different life, or for being someone else, while simultaneously expressing discontent with the ideals of normativity she has to deal with.

Mitski has openly discussed her gripes with the music industry's pressures and consumerism (Martoccio, 2021). Her songs describe life under oppressive forces, referring to the pressures of working in the music industry, capitalism more broadly, aging, or mental illness. For a lot of her fans, many who are Asian-American and/or queer (Talbot, 2019), Mitski's music provides an emotional outlet. As Zoladz (2022) writes, "Mitski's music grants people whom society often treats as marginal the screaming vividness of main characters, and this is a huge part of its appeal." While Mitski and engagements with her music on TikTok thus provide an interesting case study of the genre, her positionality as one of few racialized artists within the genre allows me to look critically at the lack of representation and at the ways links between white womanhood

and fragility can be reproduced in the genre, a fragility and vulnerability that is not afforded to women of colour in quite the same way (Aitken, 2021).

Theoretical Framework and Approaches

My analysis of sad girl music in the platform context is grounded in a theoretical framework of political economy and cultural studies, affect theory, and queer theory. The notion of political economy allows me to situate sad girl music within the social and power relations of the contemporary music industry landscape of streaming and social media platforms, providing contextualization for the ways in which sad girl music discourses are shaped by the platformization of music. With affect and emotions central to engagements with the music on TikTok, my analysis of how sadness and negative emotions are expressed is guided by conceptualizations of happiness and depression emerging from affect theory. Finally, my analysis of expressions of gender and sexuality in sad girl music TikToks is guided by queer theory approaches, which provide me with an understanding of (hetero)normativity and queer life discourses in identity expressions.

Political Economy & Cultural Studies

My analysis takes an approach based in political economy and cultural studies where political economy is understood as "the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources" (Mosco, 2009, p. 2). Sad girl music is not an officially recognized music genre, but rather an informal and oftentimes contested descriptor broadly used to loosely group together a variety of mainly female artists whose music describes and engages with negative emotions in one way or another. Applying a political economy perspective allows me to pay attention to how the term and the music are situated within complex social and power relations. Looking critically at the political economy of popular music in general, and sad girl music in specific, not only gives insight into the music itself, but has the potential of revealing further aspects of our contemporary moment.

In his book *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music*, Nealon (2018) argues that what renders popular music essential to "understanding American cultural production over the second half of the twentieth century" is its ubiquity and "everyday 'mass culture' quality" (p. 4). By focusing on popular music as a "barometer of cultural subject- or identity-production" (Nealon, 2018, p. 4), he breaks from approaches to popular music

that either adopt or reject Adorno's critique of popular music as a standardized mass culture commodity (Adorno et al., 2002, p. 438). Nealon's aim is thus not to elevate popular music to an object of high culture, to focus on its artistic merit, or to reveal a resistance to the mainstream within its mass cultural appeal. Instead, he traces how authenticity—which has always been part of popular music discourses of "being cool vs selling out"—, has become "*the* fetish commodity of twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalism" (Nealon, 2018, p. 7). In a society organized through the focus on the individual subject, where marketing is based in ideas of authenticity, consumption of popular music is an essential part of the path toward becoming the authentic self (Nealon, 2018).

Affect Theory & Conceptions of Happiness and Sadness

In seeking further understanding of how notions of happiness and sadness are mobilized through the sad girl music term and on TikTok as affective forces in a present marked by anxieties and crisis, my thesis is informed by affect theory, queer theory, and feminist theory. I situate sad girl music and culture in the context of a society marked by neoliberal capitalism and postfeminism (Gill, 2007) in which the achievement of happiness and well-being is posited as an individual responsibility. I build on work within affect theory that situates the individual affective orientation toward happiness as interconnected with the prevalent affect of anxiety. The concepts of happiness (Ahmed, 2010), cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), and depression (Cvetkovich, 2012) form an essential part of the theoretical understandings of my thesis.

Over the past decades, cultural criticism has experienced what has come to be termed the affective turn, making "emotion, feeling, and affect (and their differences) the object of scholarly inquiry," as well as inspiring "new ways of doing criticism" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 3). In this context, building on Deleuzian theories that define affect as the capacity to move and be moved, affect is broadly defined as the social feeling and bodily intensity of "precognitive sensory experience and relations to surroundings" (p. 4). Though some theorists have attempted to distinguish between affect and emotion, "where the former signals precognitive sensory experience and relations to surroundings, and the latter cultural constructs and conscious processes that emerge from them, such as anger, fear, or joy" (p. 4), others, including Ahmed, Berlant, and Cvetkovich, do not insist on this distinction but instead view emotion and affect as existing on a spectrum. Cvetkovich specifically states her use of affect as denoting "a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically

constructed in a range of ways" (p. 4). Further, the affective turn has posited affect as central to understandings of political economy.

Even though the word 'sad' in sad girl music mainly focuses on negative emotions, it is deeply entwined with happiness. Sara Ahmed's *The promise of happiness* (2010) explores how the concept of happiness has become central to understandings of the meaning, purpose, and order of human life. Tracing the history of understandings of happiness as a term and a matter of social good, she analyzes how happiness comes to be regarded as "what you get for having the right associations," and how happiness is "used to redescribe social norms as social goods" (p. 2). In this way, scholars like Ahmed (2010), Berlant (2011), Davies (2015), and Segal (2017) analyze how happiness is positioned as the ultimate goal to strive for.

Relating this conceptualization of happiness as a duty and a promise to negative feelings and mental health issues like depression, these authors show how the pressure to reproduce certain lives in order to be happy can lead to an increase in negative emotions. Along these lines, Cvetkovich's book *Depression: A public feeling* (2012) describes everyday life as producing feelings of despair and anxiety, "sometimes extreme, sometimes throbbing along at a low level, and hence barely discernible from just the way things are, feelings that get internalized and named, for better or for worse, as depression" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 14). Through the pathologizing of what she describes as ordinary depression, the impacts of social problems are categorized into individual failings (p. 12). However, Cvetkovich also argues that, by accepting rather than dismissing them, these negative feelings can teach us about happiness (p. 3). If negative feelings can thus be depathologized, they may open possibilities for political action. Though not transformed into a wholly positive experience, the affective experiences of depression may "become sites of publicity and community formation" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 2).

The idea of positive and negative feelings as being intertwined without distinct separations allows for a deeper analysis of how engagements with so-called sad girl music speak to queer youth's conceptions of happiness and their everyday anxieties around failing to achieve the social norms posited as happiness indicators. Cvetkovich's understanding of depression as something that can "create new forms of sociality, whether in public cultures that give it expression or because, as has been suggested about melancholy, it serves as the foundation for new kinds of attachment or affiliation" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 6) informs my examination of how mental health struggles and happiness are expressed on TikTok in relation to societal issues (e.g. LGBTQ+

rights). Contemplating Berlant's statement that "people born into unwelcoming worlds and unreliable environments have a different response to the new precarities than do people who presumed they would be protected" (2011, p. 20), I consider how queer youth who are growing up amid a state of constant crisis and the deconstruction of good life fantasies (p. 7) relate to sadness, happiness, and optimism.

Queer Theory

Within the normative conceptions of happiness described by Ahmed and the idea of the good life described by Berlant, heterosexual coupling is an essential marker of happiness. The authors' works are thus also deeply embedded in the field of queer theory. Since my analysis focuses on queer youth, their engagements with sad girl music, and expressions of gender and sexuality, my thesis is informed by queer theory, with queer understood as both an umbrella term as well as denoting a specific politic.

Queer theory is a critical theory approach largely seen to have emerged in the 1990s out of Lesbian and Gay Studies and Women's Studies. The initial attempt of moving from Gay/Lesbian Studies to Queer Theory was rooted in an approach of resistance: resistance to definition and 'packaging' marginal sexualities into a specific way of being. Queer Theory aims to go beyond essentialist views of gender and sexuality, questioning normativities. As Michael Warner argues in his seminal article "Fear of a Queer Planet," "The insistence on 'queer' - a term defined against 'normal' and generated precisely in the context of terror - has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence" (1991, p. 16). My thesis is grounded in these conceptions of normativity and the notion of heteronormativity which describes the ways in which heterosexuality is posited as the societal norm that everything else is oriented around. As Ahmed (2014) writes, "heterosexuality becomes a script that binds the familial with the global: the coupling of man and woman becomes a kind of 'birthing', a giving birth not only to new life, but to ways of living that are already recognisable as forms of civilisation" (p. 144). Ahmed (2006) further describes orientations as a line, a direction that we have been placed toward by the social and affective structures surrounding us. We become oriented towards the heteronormative as an ideal to achieve as a marker of happiness: "For a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. Such points accumulate, creating the impression of a straight line" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 554) Queerness disrupts

this straight line; it does not reproduce the same values and lives. These conceptions of normativity and queerness' rejection thereof will guide my analysis of queer youths' expressions of their queerness and sexuality.

Methodology

This thesis combines TikTok-specific digital research methods (Hautea et al., 2021; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Southerton, 2020), critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock, 2012, 2018, 2020), and critical discourse analysis (Wodak, 2001a) as its main methodological approaches to studying engagements with sad girl music on TikTok, in addition to a case study analysis of the Spotify-generated "sad girl starter pack" playlist. Combining these approaches allows me to examine discourses around sad girl music in the platform context, how these discourses are shaped by platform affordances, and how queer youth's mobilization of emotions, music, and identity constructions sad girl music TikToks exist within broader sociocultural and political contexts.

Data Collection: TikTok Digital Research Methods

Since TikTok is a more recent platform and many strategies for studying it are still emerging, there is no one specific method that I am using. Instead, I am drawing inspiration from a variety of approaches (e.g. Avdeeff, 2021; Hautea et al., 2021; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Central to my digital research methods are understandings of platform specificity which include "ongoing consideration of the app itself: its development and evolution, the changes in access and user capabilities" (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 51), and online groundedness which conceptualizes "research that follows the medium, captures its dynamics, and makes grounded claims about cultural and societal change" (Rogers, 2015, p. 23). Formulating methods that are specific to TikTok allowed me to understand the practices I study within their specific context. Concretely, this means that instead of using an external scraper tool, I followed the medium by using its embedded functions, such as the sound feature, as my primary methods for data collection.

In a first exploratory data collection phase conducted in March 2023, I created a blank TikTok account and used TikTok's sound feature as the starting input for finding content featuring 'sad girl music' and as the main input to train the FYP algorithm. As recent studies have shown, encouraging the algorithm to serve up specific kinds of content on the FYP is most effectively done through regular immersion in and interaction with the content (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller,

2021; Simpson et al., 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). After a few days of collecting videos through searching for specific songs by artists associated with the genre, the FYP algorithm picked up on these inputs and showed me a variety of other relevant sounds and content related to sad girl music. Returning to the data collection in October 2023, I spent another week training the algorithm by identifying popular TikTok sounds that feature songs by Mitski and boygenius, taking about an hour each day watching and liking the videos shown under searches for these sounds. Since the sound feature is very useful as an initial way to find videos, particularly for content that is older and no longer displayed on the FYP, I already started collecting relevant TikToks during this training process. Once the FYP was trained, I used it to collect further relevant content that the sound feature, due to its focus on one specific song, fails to show, such as interviews with artists, concert videos, as well as videos set to user-created sounds. In this way, I had a better view of the whole spectrum of videos engaging with sad girl music as a lot of these user-created sounds add another creative element to TikToks and reveal further ways in which fans are making meaning from the music and are building community. For example, boygenius' song "Letter To An Old Poet" (2023a) which makes direct reference to and rewrites parts of the lyrics to the band's earlier song "Me & My Dog" (2018c), inspired users to create their own sounds mashing up the two songs. The scope of my data collection was broadly limited to TikToks relating to boygenius and Mitski. However, since there are overlaps and references between content engaging with boygenius as a band and content engaging with the three artists' individual work, I maintained flexibility and also included relevant TikToks that engage with Baker, Bridgers, and/or Dacus as solo artists.

Overview of Data

Using these methods and processes, I collected a total of 222 TikToks and their metadata in an Excel spreadsheet. Ranging in popularity from 42 to 2.8 million likes, the TikToks received 58k likes on average. With most TikToks using the platform's sound feature, there are 46 different songs featured in my data collection, most of which are used only once or twice, while a few others are very prominent. Although this disproportionate distribution reflects the larger TikTok landscape where individual sounds can quickly go viral and thus feature in many videos, it can largely be explained by my data collection process which started by collecting TikToks from specific sounds before moving to the FYP as a whole. Further, there are more TikToks in my dataset focused on boygenius than on Mitski or sad girl music more broadly. One possible

explanation for this predominance of boygenius-centred TikToks is that, at the time of my first data collection in March-April 2023, boygenius had just released their debut full-length album the record, while the follow-up EP *the rest*, was released in October during my second data collection.

Since not all users include information about their gender, race, or age in their profile, it is not possible to make definitive all-encompassing statements about the demographics of the TikTok creators. However, looking at users who include information on their gender/pronouns and/or age, the majority of creators are young queer women, girls, and non-binary people in their late teens and early 20s, with ages seeming to range from approximately 15 to 30 years old. While the users' location/nationality and race are similarly difficult to determine, many users seem to be white or white-passing, with a majority seemingly located in North America.

While viewing and collecting TikToks, I kept a detailed research journal to note the main content themes I was coming across each day and carried out preliminary qualitative coding in the spreadsheet focusing on descriptive and categorical codes (Saldaña, 2021). As such, the research process was iterative in that data collection and analysis informed each other. In this way, I was able to keep track of when I started seeing the same kinds of content and discursive themes arising over and over, at which point I decided I had reached saturation for the purpose of this project.

However, since what is shown to me on the FYP is always only a partial representation of the content posted to TikTok and is guided by the inputs I was providing the platform with, this data collection can never be a fully representative sample of the entirety of sad girl music TikTok. Further, since TikTok is an incredibly fast-paced platform where new trends and discourses arise on a weekly basis, my dataset captures snapshots of sad girl music TikTok that reflect specific points in time, namely March 2023 and October 2023.

Data Analysis

As my research is interested in both the discourses that emerge around sad girl music and the ways these are shaped by technology, my analytical approach was initially informed by critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA). Conceptualized by Brock (2012, 2018, 2020), "Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) is a multimodal analytic technique for the investigation of Internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture" (Brock, 2018, p. 1012) that "interrogates culture-*as*-technology and culture-*of*-technology, examining information technologies alongside discourses about them" (Brock, 2020, p. 8). In this approach, the theoretical framework is applied to both the "semiotics of the information and communication technology

(ICT) hardware and software" and to the "discourses of its users" (Brock, 2018, p. 1013). In this sense, CTDA posits "technology as text" (Brock, 2020, p. 27) and hence understands technologies as simultaneously shaped by and shaping social relations and cultural meanings. While I did not carry out an in-depth interface analysis, my analytical approach was guided by CTDA in its close attention to platforms and their implication in the shaping of discourses, as well as in its application of the theoretical framework to the discourses emerging in sad girl music TikToks.

In examining how meaning is constructed in sad girl music TikToks, my analysis was further guided by critical discourse analysis which is an essential part of Brock's approach to CTDA. Critical discourse analysis aims to interpret discourse and texts by paying attention to the sociocultural contexts they emerge in (Wodak, 2001a). Within this approach, language is perceived as a form of social practice and "discourse is a way of signifying a particular domain of social practice from a particular perspective" (Wodak, 2001b). As such, a critical discourse analysis of sad girl music TikToks looks at TikToks as cultural texts, considering how they are embedded in sociocultural structures of meaning and reveal underlying ideological and cultural assumptions.

Following the main phase of data collection, I carried out two rounds of qualitative coding informed by feminist constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008). Using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA, coding followed an inductive approach that took a close look at each individual video and applied descriptive and categorical codes (Saldaña, 2021) in order to identify emerging themes and practices within sad girl music TikToks. Conducting a critical discourse analysis of the collected videos, I paid close attention to how the TikToks engaged in discourses around sad girl music and how their expressions related to broader contexts, as well how they existed within and made use of the specific platform context. In this way, I, on the one hand, identified the key content themes that emerge in the TikToks, and, on the other hand, also specifically examined how the platform's affordances both shape and are shaped by that content and the practices utilized to convey it.

To interpret sad girl music discourses on TikTok within broader sociocultural meanings and technological structures, I carried out a case study analysis of Spotify's "sad girl starter pack" playlist. This allowed me to explore how platforms are shaping discourses around sad girl music, as well as how the platformization of music at large is increasingly shaping approaches to music consumption. Further, I analyzed music lyrics to contextualize the TikToks within their frame of reference, and looked at press interviews featuring the selected musicians (e.g. Barshad, 2023;

Patel, 2023; Syme, 2023; Zoladz, 2022), as well as the artists' expressions on social media to investigate how the music's content, and the artists' positionalities and self-representations factor into discourses emerging around the music and its socio-political contexts.

Approaching Fandom Studies as Both Scholar and Fan

In analysing engagements with sad girl music on TikTok, it is important for me to state my relation to these engagements and to the music itself. Despite never having actively contributed to these sad girl music fandom practices on TikTok, as a fan of the music, my analysis is informed by my immersion in and familiarity with fan culture. My experiences with the music and with mental health issues shape how I approach the topic. I am not only an observer in the sense that my shared affinity to the subject matter position me not fully within, but in close proximity to the communities I am studying. As such, I do not claim an objective approach, but instead believe that my immersion and familiarity with the practices and discourses I study facilitated my understanding of them, and thus furthered the analysis.

Having listened to the music for many years and having been immersed in sad girl music TikTok since I first downloaded the app in 2020, I am intimately familiar with the content, memes, and discourses present in my data collection. Because of that, I am able to recognize references and practices that may not always be legible to someone newly entering the space. As such, I do have a certain responsibility to both the people and communities on TikTok, as well as to the musicians creating the music, and need to be mindful of how I approach and present them in my research. At the same time, my academic background and the theoretical framework of this thesis provide me with a particular lens to look at these practices through. As Jenkins writes, while researching fan cultures as a fan requires specific consideration of one's positionality and biases, "it also facilitates certain understandings and forms of access impossible through other positionings" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 6).

Ethical Considerations

While my thesis did not require institutional ethics approval as I am not working directly with people, ethical considerations still play an important part in my research process. Seeing as online engagements with sad girl music often contain mentions or discussions of mental illness, I had to be mindful of the fact that queer youth's expressions of mental illness and happiness require sensitivity as the lines between the public, personal, and private are blurry in posts like these, even

if publicly posted on TikTok. As Highfield and Leaver (2016) write, within visual social media, "there are practices that are intended to be visible to some groups (using a particular hashtag, for instance) but which might not be considered as potentially viewable by a wider audience (or seen as potential research subjects)" (p. 57). Further, considering that I am focusing on queer youth, not all of these people may be out in other parts of their life, meaning I had to ensure a base-level of privacy.

As there is no one specific approach within social media research discourses on how to ethically use social media data for research purposes, my considerations around privacy in studying sad girl music TikToks were informed by the Association of Internet Researchers' guidelines on ethical internet research (franzke et al., 2020) which focus on a context- and process-oriented approach, and I further engaged with the questions for consideration outlined by Jacobson and Gorea (2022). Due to its sensitivity, I decided to anonymize the data in my writing by removing usernames. Since I wanted to include some screenshots of TikTok content to illustrate my analysis, I further considered different approaches to anonymizing images (Hautea et al., 2021; Kaye et al., 2021, 2022). Where possible, I screenshotted a part of the video that did not show the creator's face or cropped the images to exclude facial features. When that was not possible, I obscured faces by overlaying them with coloured blocks and blacked out usernames and profile pictures. While these may alter how the TikToks are perceived, I did not want to put the screenshots through any types of software that would automatically obscure the faces in other ways as the data protection and privacy measures of these kinds of services are not always clear. I left images of memes untouched, since memes are generally created with the intent of wide-spread sharing. I also considered the popularity and reach of the creators, and, in the case of one screenshot (cf. Figure 4-2), left the face visible as the creator, Laufey, is herself a popular musician with over 7 million followers on TikTok and can thus be considered a public figure who is considering their online presence as part of her public image. Although these measures make it more difficult to illustrate the emotions that are often communicated through facial expressions in the TikToks, I believe that they were necessary to preserve the privacy and safety of the queer youth whose TikToks I analyze.

Given recent concerns about TikTok's user surveillance and data extraction and the new restrictions and guidelines for public institutions these have resulted in (Canadian Press, 2023; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2023), I also needed to consider how to ensure the safety

of my own personal data. While my research was not impacted by Concordia University's regulations that require the removal of the TikTok app from university-owned devices as I am using a personal device, I took additional measures to keep my data safe. Namely, I aimed to remove as much of my personal data as possible from the personal iPad I used by disconnecting it from my iCloud accounts and uninstalling most other apps.

Chapter Outline

This introduction has provided a first entry to sad girl music. I have introduced the main theoretical frameworks of political economy, affect theory, and queer theory that my thesis is grounded in and have established the methodological approaches guiding this analysis. In the next chapter, the literature review contextualizes my analysis of sad girl music within existing scholarship on online girlhood and sadness, platformization of music and TikTok affordances, and publics, and fandom studies.

In chapter three, I carry out a case study analysis of Spotify's popular "sad girl starter pack" playlist (Spotify, n.d.). Drawing on the concept of platformization, I analyze how streaming platforms such as Spotify influence sad girl music. I argue that mainstream understandings of the genre are shaped by platform representations and that the platformization of music has affected music consumption, increasingly associating it with identity expressions and specific moods.

With chapter three thus providing context for sad girl music's place within the broader music and platform landscape, chapter four moves into my analysis of sad girl music TikToks. The chapter highlights the centrality of identity constructions to queer youth's engagement with sad girl music, showing how queer youth make use of the platform's affordances for collective identity constructions and community-formation, and explorations and expressions of identity and queerness, as well as how they create an entry point to queer spaces by queering mainstream trends and fandom practices.

Carrying on with the TikTok analysis, chapter five focuses on the affects and emotions represented in the TikToks and how they relate to broader contexts, examining how sadness is represented in relation to the individual, the community, the societal, and the political level. The chapter shows how sad girl music TikToks highlight the inherent sociality of sadness and queer youth's desire for their emotions to be recognized, and how identification with emotions in music provides queer youth a way to understand and process their emotions and despair about the futility of hoping for the future, allowing them to recognize how their experiences are shaped by socio-

political contexts and structures. In addition, the chapter considers the political potentials of sad girl music TikToks.

The conclusion returns to the research questions to trace the thesis's main findings, its implications and impacts. It reflects on the research process, the context of writing this thesis, and the limitations faced. Finally, I consider the potentials for future research avenues, thinking particularly about the ways in which the last year has indicated a move from sad girl music to lesbian pop and what this shift might indicate within the current socio-political moment.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this thesis, I largely draw on scholarship from girlhood studies, social media and platform studies, and fandom studies to contextualize my analysis of sad girl music. Split into these three overarching categories, this chapter first looks at sad girl culture through the literature on girlhood, intimacy, and online cultures, and relates it to previous feminist music cultures. Then, I delve into the concept of platformization and engage with the research on TikTok, the platform's focus on music, and its relation to the music industry. Finally, I consider conceptualizations of publics and conclude with an overview of fan studies.

Girlhood, Music Cultures, and Affect

In order to explore sad girl music through the scholarship on girlhood and expressions of emotions online, I first want to contextualize it in relation to previous generations of queer and feminist music cultures, particularly its affinities with the riot grrrls movement of the 1990s, and outline sad girl music's emergence through early 2010s online cultures. In mapping the links appearing in the literature about these two moments, I trace shifts and changes in affective focal points from anger to sadness, and highlight how these music cultures emerged in response to their respective socio-political contexts. I then turn to focus more specifically on the aspect of gender, looking at how literature on girlhood interprets recent increases in discourses around girlhood and femininity.

Early 2010s Sad Girl Culture & Riot Grrrls: Socio-political Contexts & Affective Focus

Riot grrrl is an underground feminist music movement that emerged in the Pacific Northwest in the early 1990s in response to the often male-dominated culture of the punk and grunge scene. Combining feminism, punk, music, and politics, riot grrrl is often associated with third wave feminist movements and focused on providing space for women and girls in the music scene. With the term thus denoting both a music genre and a larger feminist subculture movement that also included a vibrant DIY and zine culture, some of the bands most synonymous with it are Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy (Marcus, 2010).

Within the music, zines, and broader riot grrrls movement, the focus was simultaneously on personal experiences and responding to political and societal contexts, taking an approach of the personal as political. Though the end of the Cold War had subsided fears of nuclear attack in the early 1990s, the threats of climate change and global warming were starting to enter

mainstream discourses, HIV/AIDS loomed over sexual awakenings, Anita Hill's testimony brought the issue of sexual harassment to the forefront, and "for the first time in the nation's history, young people told pollsters they expected to do worse than their parents had done" (Marcus, 2010, p. 190). In response to this context, riot grrrl "applied tactics of confessional songwriting to political issues" (Marcus, 2010, p. 130). In riot grrrl meetings, girls were given space to talk about their personal experiences, share with one another, and build connections based on understanding, while expressing their anger at their wider political and social situation. As Lusty (2017) argues, this focus on personal and intimate stories reformulated "feminism through the intimate performances of everyday experience and cultural re-appropriation" (p. 225).

Sad girl culture is similarly, albeit often less explicitly, responding to a specific political and social context, and focusing on emotions and the personal. In response to the political and social context of the 2010s, termed an "age of perpetual crisis" (Beckett, 2019), sad girl culture saw expressions of sadness as a form of resistance. Coming out of the 2008 recession, the early 2010s were marked by political, social, and economic turmoil on a global scale, as exemplified in the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements. Racial inequities and police violence further came to the forefront with the Black Lives Matter movement, the threat of climate change has become ever more pressing, and the election of Trump as US President in 2016 highlighted increasing political divisions. In this context, the beginnings of this sad girl phenomenon are epitomized in the flower-crowned, mascara-smudged image of glamourous sadness cultivated by Lana del Rey who first rose to fame in 2011 (H. Williams, 2017). On tumblr, young women and girls were posting movie stills accompanied by Sylvia Plath and rupi kaur poetry, on Twitter, writer Melissa Broder was posting about being sad on the highly popular account @sosadtoday, and, on Instagram, sad girls were posting pictures of themselves crying (Holowka, 2018). At the time, this focus on sadness and mental health stood in contrast to the media landscape of the early twenty-first century, which was largely focused on happiness (Ahmed, 2010; Davies, 2015; Thelandersson, 2023, p. 1), and in which dominant postfeminist discourses focused on notions of women's personal choice and "being oneself" while simultaneously expecting women to be empowered and strong (Gill, 2007; Thelandersson, 2023, p. 10). Sad girl culture on social media presented an alternative to these discourses, providing young women and girls with avenues to express negative emotions and not always have to present as strong (Mooney, 2018). In the context of postfeminist notions of female empowerment and the neoliberal obsession with authenticity and individuality, sharing one's

deeply personal emotions of sadness simultaneously presents a break with pressures on women to present as strong, while further reinforcing the focus on the individual by aestheticizing these emotions (Hines, 2014).

The rise of social media platforms such as tumblr and Instagram in the 2010s thus opened new spaces for young women and girls to express these negative emotions and engage with mental health in a semi-public online space. Alderton defines this phenomenon and its central figure as such: "The Sad Girl is core to a new brand of feminism and philosophy that defines the performance of mood online, revealing both *why* young women are so sad and *how* sadness can actually be a way of releasing negative affect and protesting wrongdoing rather than wallowing in non-action" (Alderton, 2018, p. 95). Thelandersson's book *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture* (2023) further examines the emergence of this phenomenon and discusses (social) media discourses around female mental health. Particularly pertinent to my research is the author's discussion of how mental health was talked about within tumblr and Instagram sad girl culture, and how these expressions may be forms of empowerment with potential for social change. In this context, Instagram user and artist Audrey Wollen's "Sad Girl Theory" is interesting in its proposal of sadness as an act of resistance and form of political protest (Wollen cited in Tunnicliffe, 2015). With this approach, Wollen is "trying to open up the idea that protest doesn't have to be external to the body; it doesn't have to be a huge march in the streets, noise, violence, or rupture […] Girls' sadness isn't quiet, weak, shameful, or dumb: It is active, autonomous, and articulate. It's a way of fighting back" (Wollen cited in Tunnicliffe, 2015). Holowka (2018) considers how this theory is at once problematic in its re-fetishization of sadness and its exclusionary approach that mainly centres white middle-class women, while at the same time allowing for a subversion of the objectified body and potential for empowerment.

Comparing these sociopolitical contexts, both mark an unstable time for many young women and girls and, for some, engagements with these feminist music cultures provided them with a space to find community and to be exposed to political ideas. Both riot grrrl and sad girl culture can be regarded as responding to the specific political and societal contexts they emerged in. Further, they contain similarities in that they both take the personal as political, centre on female emotions, and incorporate autobiographical storytelling and personal narratives. Despite these similarities, they differ in the affects they focus on. In contrast to sad girl music which, as the name

suggests, revolves mainly around sadness, the main affect of riot grrrl is anger. This shift from anger to sadness is reflective of broader societal shifts in public discourses, as well as of the respective contexts of emergence.

In the context of 2010s girlboss feminism and focus on empowerment, sad girl culture took sadness as a form of resistance. At the initial time of its appearance, this focus on sadness, mental health, and negative emotions more broadly ran counter to the societal focus on happiness. However, in recent years, there has been a social inclination towards greater awareness of mental health issues and sadness within the mainstream (Thelandersson, 2023). It is in this recent context that sad girl music became a popular term outside of early 2010s tumblr sad girl culture, used within public discourses to describe and market melancholic music by mainly female artists (Thelandersson, 2023). Thus, with the increase in discourses on mental health that followed, sadness may be more lethargic than anger as a response since it frequently encourages a looking inward that can easily lead to pathologization of problems. Anger on the other hand more often represents a looking outward that tries to locate issues not with the individual, but with the world at large (Braidotti, 2015). Although depathologizing sadness and depression may also make space for political action, as argued by Cvetkovich (2012), the anger underlying much of the riot grrrl movement may lend itself more easily to political expressions due to its focus on external factors. However, as can be seen with the rise of the 'girl power' movement and bands like the Spice Girls in the latter half of the 1990s, the riot grrrl anger was also repurposed in a commodified and depoliticized way. In particular, while both riot grrrls and sad girl culture started out as focusing on the personal as political, in a neoliberal context of individuation, the focus on the personal can quickly turn into a pathologization that locates the issue within the individual instead of within the sociopolitical structures (Marcus, 2010; Meltzer, 2010). Although this shows how different kinds of music cultures can emerge as forms of resistance to the status quo but then become commodified and folded into mainstream discourses, encounters with the commodified girl power in mainstream pop music can lead audiences back to the riot grrrl source material, introducing them to the explicitly political engagements (Hains, 2014). Similarly, the greater acknowledgment of mental illness today has not eliminated moralizing discourses on youth's mental health issues in its entirety. As Holmes (2023) shows in her analysis of the feminist aesthetics of depression in Billie Eilish's music, the very explicit naming of depression is at times still met with moralizing discourses over youth's mental health issues and highlights the long history of "cultural

understanding of normative femininity as pathological" (Dobson, 2015, p. 41) that has linked femininity and girlhood, in particular, to negative emotions such as melancholia (McRobbie, 2009). Therefore, these kinds of direct engagements with mental illness continue challenge stigma and shift the mainstream neoliberal discourses of depression that emphasize individual resilience and understate lived realities and the impact of structural causes on mental health. While the aim of my thesis is not to determine the political potential of sad girl music, this comparison between riot grrrl and sad girl culture through the literature on girlhood, socio-political contexts, and affects in music cultures provides important context for my analysis of sad girl music TikToks.

The Year of the Girl: Girlification Between Resistance and Reproduction of Gender

Throughout these explorations of riot grrrl and sad girl culture, there is a clear focus on femininity and girlhood, as exemplified by the terms themselves. Over the past years, girlhood has been omnipresent in popular discourses, and in 2023, the year of my data collection, these discourses reached their peak in what came to be described as "the year of the girl" (Bacon, 2023). Between the July 2023 release of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* making the colour pink unavoidable as the world ran out of pink paint, "girl dinner" becoming short-hand for no-cooking arrangements of food (Gorman & Lam, 2023), Taylor Swift's Eras Tour reinvigorating local economies (Kopstein & Espada, 2023), and people identifying with ever more specific categorizations of girl on TikTok (from tomato girls to clean girls), everything has been girlified. In this context, the word "girl" is not always a gendered term, but can refer to and be claimed by "anyone on the internet" to be used as "a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an exclamation, meaning something slightly different depending on how it's said and who has said it" (Solis, 2023). Originating from within Black, gay, and trans communities, the term expresses a sense of shared experiences, establishing a certain kind of in-group (Solis, 2023). This use of the term "girl" as a way of connecting with others highlights the significance of relatability in online spaces. Kanai (2019) posits relatability "as an affective relation (Pedwell 2014) produced through labour that reflects a desirable notion of common experience to an unknown audience" which "requires the ability to produce an account of personal experience that assumes generality, and plausibly but pleasingly reflects this audience's experience in particular ways" (Kanai, 2019, p. 4). This concept of relatability as examined within feminine digital cultures is highly relevant to my study of publics on TikTok whose practices show similar desire for and expression of common experiences.

In a societal context where femininity is still often seen as frivolous, for many people, the use of the term girl and the enjoyment of "girly" things is a way of reclaiming girlhood and celebrating the objects and activities often dismissed in patriarchal contexts. On TikTok, women in their 20s and 30s are embracing girlishness and femininity to honour their younger selves who largely received messages painting femininity as a bad thing, thus countering their internalized misogyny (Bacon, 2023). Further, girlification can serve as a coping mechanism, as a form of escapism from the adult responsibilities usually tied to womanhood, as Cai (2023) writes: "At the heart of this imagined girlhood is an expression of femininity without consequence." In this way, this newly increased focus on and celebration of girlhood reflects people's deeper insecurities about the current state of the world and their place in it.

At the same time, these engagements with girlhood are often ironic, containing a "sneaky subversiveness" (Solis, 2023), or what Miekus and Medri (2024) call a "sillification of cuteness" that "performs the ridiculousness of patriarchy," thus acting as a form of resistance against this state of the world. By leaning into femininity and enacting a certain silliness, girls engage in a form of trolling and "[refuse] to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house" in a way that instead "disturbs their smooth and ingrained nature and *sillifies* them" (Miekus & Medri, 2024). This is illustrated by the "Girl Math" trend that went viral on TikTok in 2023. Sharing their view of money, girls – for example – explained how, according to girl math, a concert booked months in advance is basically free by the time you attend it due to the money already having left your account a long time ago. While some news sources declared this trend to exemplify bad budgeting and money management (Kawata, 2023), others argue that it refuses the "seriousness of money" and thus resists neoliberal capitalism (Miekus & Medri, 2024). Overarchingly, this trend exemplifies the tensions within girlification and girl trends. On one hand, they can be regarded as a reclamation of femininity and resistance to patriarchy, but on the other, they may also reinforce stereotypes about women's inferior math skills and reflect a sense of self-infantilization and anti-intellectualism. Particularly, in the context of "Trad Wife" content that emphasizes traditional gender roles in marriage and woman's subservience to their husband becoming more popular on social media (Elmhirst, 2024; Petersen, 2023), the line between performing femininity and silliness as resistance, and reproducing stereotypes and essentialist conceptions of gender can become blurry, especially for those looking from an outside perspective. While the "sad girl" term largely

precedes the year of the girl, it is still embedded in these discourses, requiring me to pay attention to how gender is engaged with and constructed within sad girl music TikToks.

Platforms, TikTok, and the Music Industry

My study of engagements with sad girl music on TikTok also draws on literature that provides an understanding of the music industry within the current platform context of streaming services, as well as of TikTok as a platform, its affordances, and technological features, particularly in its relation to music. In this section, I start with a brief introduction of how platformization is conceptualized, and how music streaming services and Spotify in particular reflect the platformization of the music industry. I then move into an examination of scholarship on TikTok as a music-centric platform, its affordances, and its impacts on and relation to the music industry.

Platformization of Music: Music Streaming Services

Platformization, defined by Poell (2020) as "the penetration of economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions of digital platforms in the cultural industries" (p. 651), is increasingly impacting the music industry. It has reorganized cultural production and distribution practices and changed the former audience-content-advertising configuration to one where platforms now have increasing control over all these aspects. As literature on current developments in the music industry highlights, music streaming platforms like Spotify have come to dominate both promotion and distribution processes and, as such, are reshaping music discovery, consumption, and production (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2021; Eriksson et al., 2019; Prey et al., 2022).

With 602 million monthly listeners in 2023, Spotify is the most popular music streaming service and thus can serve as an example for the wider music streaming landscape. Founded in 2006 in Sweden by David Ek and Martin Lorentzon, Spotify provides its users access to a library of over 100 million songs, as well as podcasts and other audio content licensed through distribution deals with record and other media companies (Eriksson et al., 2019). Spotify's business model relies on both advertisements and a subscription model. The platform provides two different access levels to users, with basic features being accessible for free with ads, while the full ad-free features require a paid subscription. However, the majority of the income from advertisements and subscriptions does not turn into profit for Spotify, but instead goes to music rights holders, mainly record companies who then have their own metrics for distributing these royalties. These royalty payouts happen on a so-called pro rata system, based on an artist's streams in relation to the total

number of streams (Sisario, 2021). The system by which artists receive payments for music streams is quite complex and Spotify has been criticized for unfair compensation of musicians. Since streaming services do not have a standard rate per stream, different from sales of physical media, many artists, particularly new and emerging artists, often have a harder time earning enough money from just their music to live on, making it necessary for many to put more energy into merchandise sales and live shows. This trend is exacerbated by new regulations implemented by Spotify in 2024, according to which tracks have to reach a minimum amount of annual streams before generating any revenue, a move that especially affects smaller artists (Stutz, 2023). At the same time, because payouts are based on streams, this incentivizes artists to create shorter songs that encourage more replays (Chen, 2024). While streaming platforms often proclaimed themselves as democratizing the music industry (Hodgson, 2021), they are thus also reproducing many of the pre-existing power dynamics of the music industry and leaving smaller artists struggling to make ends meet. In these ways, Spotify exemplifies how platformization is impacting the music industry for both musicians and listeners as I will explore further in the next chapter.

TikTok as a Music-Centric Platform. While music streaming platforms like Spotify are thus the most obvious interventions in the music industry over the past 15 years, social media platforms, and particularly TikTok, also play an increasing role in shaping the music industry. TikTok is a short video based social media platform that has rapidly increased in popularity over the past few years, and particularly during the initial wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 (Kaye et al., 2022). Especially popular with young people, TikTok shows each user a personalized For You Page (FYP) of content based on the platform's recommendation algorithm (Zhao, 2021). The content users see on their FYP is thus based on their previous interactions with other content, video characteristics, and device settings (Kaye et al., 2022, p. 58), which means that the FYP becomes highly tailored to individual users' interests and forms of expression.

Partly emerging out of the lip-syncing platform Musical.ly, TikTok is inherently music-centric (Kaye et al., 2022). In particular, the app's sound feature is central to affording the creation of shared affects and keeping users engaged. Similar to comparable sound template features that existed on platforms like Vine, the TikTok sound feature allows users to easily incorporate music into their videos, to use sounds created by other users, and thus to easily replicate content (Kaye et al., 2022, pp. 23, 32). When creating a TikTok, the top of the screen displays a banner encouraging users to add a sound. Clicking on it, the interface shows a list of suggested sounds

that can be directly added to the TikTok. Scrolling through the FYP, the bottom right corner features a small icon of the sound used in the TikTok, that, when clicking on it, displays the sound name, creator, the number of posts using it, a button to save the sound to favourites, as well as all the TikToks that feature the sound. In addition, two large banners at the bottom of the screen encourage users to "add to story" or "use this sound" in their own posts. Users are also able to create their own sounds by importing sounds from videos or uploading sounds from a local source. TikTok sounds range from songs officially licensed through TikTok's deals with record companies, to user-uploaded versions of songs, to a variety of speech and sound effects. They can be used in a variety of ways, such as providing "a foundation to one's video in a dance or other challenges, memes, lip-syncing, reactions or as a 'mood setter'" (Radovanović, 2022, p. 55). In addition to the sound feature itself, the TikTok duet and stitch features create further possibilities for working with and manipulating sound (Radovanović, 2022, p. 55). With the duet feature, users can create a side-by-side video with another user's post, thus allowing for overlaying sound, while the stitch feature takes a short clip from another user's video and follows it with new content, thus allowing for a continuance of an existing sound (Radovanović, 2022, p. 56). Both features thus provide users with opportunities for creative uses of sounds and music-making.

Due to the creativity and easy replicability afforded by TikTok's features, sounds can be used as "a 'ready-made' element and a base for memes" (Radovanović, 2022, p. 55) and can quickly go viral on the platform. Abidin and Kaye (2021) analyze how the affordances of templatability and circumscribed creativity arise from these features, allowing for audio memes to emerge on the platform. Considering how memes can facilitate feelings of familiarity in online spaces "where participation signals a creator's literacy in group norms as well as solidarity" (Hautea et al., 2021, p. 3), these possibilities for creating audio memes open up new ways in which music and memes can be mobilized to facilitate affective publics (Hautea et al., 2021, p. 6). Overarchingly, TikTok's interface and features encourage imitation and replication. The sound feature in particular affords users replicability. By simply clicking on the "use this sound" icon, users can replicate and imitate the content grouped together through the sound, thus making it easy to contribute to a particular trend (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1880). Building on previous conceptualizations of networked publics (boyd, 2011) and considering the platform's focus on imitation and replication, Zulli and Zulli argue that TikTok facilitates the formation of what they term imitation publics. Defined "as a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted

through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication" (Zulli and Zulli, 2022, p. 1882), imitation publics thus constitute new ways for audiences to gather around and engage with music. As I will explore in my analysis chapters, many users engaging with sad girl music on TikTok are creating posts that are similarly based in the repetition of certain trends or formats. Particularly considering the personal aspect and vulnerability of videos referencing emotions and mental health issues, these posts can create connections between users that may be considered to constitute imitation publics.

TikTok's Impact on Music Discovery. With music and sounds being so central to TikTok, the platform is increasingly influencing the processes of music making, consumption, and promotion, impacting the music industry at large in new ways. Since TikTok's sound feature enables the rapid spread of certain sounds and songs (Boffone, 2022, p. 4), it has increasingly become a place of music discovery that, in some cases, can make songs go viral and provide artists with overnight success (A. Brown, 2024), particularly when songs are used as part of music or dance challenges or trends and memes.

In an analysis of names on the Spotify 200 new artists playlists between 2020 and 2021, journalists discovered that a quarter came from TikTok (Caswell and Daniels cited in Radovanović, 2022, p. 63). Further, out of the 367 artists who were signed by a major record label in that same time period, 129 had first gone viral on TikTok (Caswell and Daniels cited in Radovanović, 2022, p. 63). While not every artist sharing their music on TikTok will go viral, these numbers show that TikTok can lead to substantial success outside of the platform. For Mitski, although already an established artist with a loyal fanbase, the popularity of her song "My Love is Mine All Mine" on TikTok, where it has been used in millions of videos, made it her most commercially successful song ever and her first to debut on the Billboard Hot 100 chart where it stayed for 20 weeks and peaked at number 26 (Billboard, n.d.; Martoccio, 2023; Snapes, 2023). TikTok's influence on the song's success is further illustrated by its multi-stay at the number 1 position of the TikTok Billboard Top 50 chart. Considering how TikTok drives songs onto the charts, in September 2023, TikTok and Billboard announced the inauguration of the collaborative TikTok Billboard Top 50 chart that would specifically monitor music popularity on TikTok week to week, taking a combination of TikToks created using a song, user engagement, and video views as basis (Atkinson, 2023). Mitski's "My Love is Mine All Mine" reached the number 1 position on October 14, 2023, where it stayed for 3 weeks (Rutherford, 2023).

Due to this potential for music success, artists and record labels are increasingly using TikTok to promote songs in the hopes of landing a viral hit. It has become a common strategy for artists to tease a snippet of their new song and encouraging audiences to pre-save it through a link in the artist's bio so as to get notified when the full song drops, which has become further facilitated by the introduction of TikTok's "Add to Music App" feature in 2023, allowing users to saving music directly from the app to streaming services like Spotify or Apple Music (Marcin, 2023). Through this approach, artists and labels hope to create buzz around the music before its release and drive listeners to their streaming service profiles. While artists who already have (some) name recognition, the backing of larger labels, or marketing teams often have the abilities to promote their music through these means, smaller artists with less support may experience more pressures to use TikTok to their advantage by not only posting about their music but aiming to actively gather an audience and encourage them to use the music in their posts to further drive engagement (Radovanović, 2022, p. 62).

TikTok's Impact on Music-Making. As the fast pace of scrolling on TikTok means that users make split second decisions on whether to watch a video in full before moving on to the next one, music must grab their attention from the get-go. Thus, it needs to be divided into short snippets that are catchy enough to incite further listening and engagement (Radovanović, 2022, p. 62). These pressures of having to consider the viral potential of a song can impact the creative process of song-writing and influence the music making itself (Radovanović, 2022, p. 62). Consequently, some critics have argued that these platform conventions encourage "artists to create a certain kind of music that's seemingly designed to go viral" (D'Souza, 2024). In 2023, many of the most popular songs on TikTok were sped-up remixes (TikTok Newsroom, 2023), indicating a focus on catchy sounds. While streaming has already been impacting song length and composition, social media platforms like TikTok are creating pressures to decrease song length further. Because streaming platforms like Spotify only pay royalties to artists when at least 30 seconds of a song have been listened to, short intros and "instantly engaging hooks" have become dominant and led to songs becoming shorter over time (Chen, 2024). Further, the focus on replicability also encourages repetition within music itself. Zulli and Zulli argue that "artists are tailoring their songs to become more replicable" (2022, p. 1884). Going back to the popularity of Mitski's "My Love is Mine All Mine" on TikTok, Snapes (2023) speculates that one of the reasons for its success may have been "its relative simplicity compared with the other songs on an open-ended and existential

record." Though it is again not possible to make definite statements on the exact causes, this example shows how song simplicity, changing technological contexts of music consumption, and commercial success may be shaping one another.

Copyright Issues and TikTok's Licensing Deals with Major Record Companies. While these different developments within music promotion and composition show TikTok's impact on the music industry, the platform is also dependent on its relations to the industry and to major record labels. The use of popular music on TikTok has also brought up copyright issues. Consequently, TikTok reached licensing deals with major record labels that allow users to add songs to their videos through the platform's internal song library (Kastrenakes, 2020; The Music Network Staff, 2021; TikTok Newsroom, 2019). In this way, official sounds for songs are provided from the record labels and an artist's songs are attached to their profile.

While this system was effective for some time, in early 2024, Universal Music Group (UMG), one of the biggest music labels in the world, removed its complete catalogue of music from the platform following a dispute between the company and TikTok over the renewal of their licensing agreement (Zhu, 2024). In an open letter, UMG, who represents some of the most popular musicians like Taylor Swift, as well as boygenius, stated "appropriate compensation for our artists and songwriters, protecting human artists from the harmful effects of AI, and online safety for TikTok's users" as the critical issues they were unable to come to an agreement to with TikTok (Universal Music Group, 2024). Further, they accused TikTok of attempting to "bully" them into accepting a deal that would pay artists only a fraction of what other social media platforms do and that would not be in alignment with TikTok's exponential growth over the past years and their self-proclaimed focus on music (Universal Music Group, 2024). Consequently, all official songs by artists signed with UMG or one of its subsidiaries were removed from the platform, effectively muting millions of TikToks that used them, including many of the TikToks using boygenius' music that I analyze in this thesis, the majority of which I had luckily downloaded, thus keeping the sound intact. This move from UMG meant that users could no longer add the music to their TikToks as easily. In cases where a boygenius song (or other song under a UMG label) was only used as a background sound with the creator talking to the camera or including an additional voiceover, the entire TikTok was muted, thus effectively removing any content transmitted via speech.

During this time, songs that had been officially removed still made their way back on the platform into new videos through user-created sounds. Users can still create their own sounds

containing copyrighted music, and even though TikTok's sound-matching system is designed to identify songs, it is not always able to do so correctly (Kaye et al., 2022, p. 86). When a song is thus not identified automatically, TikTok's copyright policy outlines that for copyright holders, "contacting the user directly may resolve [their] complaint more quickly and in a way that is more beneficial to [copyright holders], the user, and our community" (TikTok, n.d.). Users are further bypassing the automatic detection system in creative ways by using different titles or changing the speed or pitch of the music itself (Robinson, 2024). However, since these user-generated sounds are specifically meant to bypass copyright detection, the user-generated sounds mainly benefit TikTok users who can continue using the music, but do not benefit artists financially since their royalty payouts are dependent on the record company's licensing agreements. While the dispute between UMG and TikTok was settled in early May 2024 and songs returned to the platform (TikTok Newsroom, 2024), this conflict reflects the mutual influence and interdependency between TikTok and record companies, further illustrating the implications of the platformization of music.

Publics and Fandom Studies

As the discussion of TikTok literature above already touched on, TikTok's focus on repetition and imitation produce new forms of sociality and connection between users. TikTok affordances open novel ways for fan and listening communities to engage with music and one another, allowing them to express their identity in relation to artists and music, as well as to find community. In order to understand how publics might form around sad girl music on TikTok, I draw on scholarship that explores how communities form on TikTok, and how the platform presents a contradictory space for LGBTQ+ users, as well as mobilizing conceptualizations of publics that guide my considerations of sad girl music TikTok. I then examine the literature on fan studies, and particularly queer fandom practices, that will provide further context for my analysis.

TikTok & Publics

On TikTok, different communities are often referred to as different "sides" of the platform, often referred to by adding "Tok" to the community identifier (e.g., "BookTok") (Kaye et al., 2022; Maddox & Gill, 2023). By being presented with highly specific personal content through the platform's algorithmic personalization, users can come to feel belonging to the "side" of TikTok that content is part of. In this way, TikTok, like tumblr before it, is largely structured around "niche

taste communities" and "micro individuality" (Anselmo, 2018, p. 90) where sides "function as a space, tool, and way of being" (Maddox & Gill, 2023, p. 11) with their own conventions, trends, and video formats, and facilitate the formation of communities around specific artists, topics, or identities. Looking at TikTok "sides" as (counter)publics, I particularly consider how these niche-specific trends and content conventions exist within sad girl music TikToks.

For LGBTQ+ users, the For You Page algorithm plays a significant role in constructing contradictory identity spaces that both "support LGBTQ+ identity work and reaffirm LGBTQ+ identity, while also transgressing and violating the identities of individual users" (Simpson & Semaan, 2021, p. 1). For many marginalized users, TikTok thus presents a double bind: they often face over-regulation and discrimination on the platform (i.e. censoring/removal of content relating to queerness or Black activism (Skinner, 2022, p. 80)), but at the same time, the platform can enable them to find community by immersing them in content that is highly relevant to their interests, identities, and shared sentiments (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021, p. 4), and it is often these positive aspects that users and scholars focus on. For example, Hiebert and Kortes-Miller (2021) found that TikTok provided a supportive community to gender and sexual minority youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, the platform allows for the formation of what Papacharissi (2016) has termed affective publics: "networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (p. 311). However, it is important to keep in mind the platform context these publics exist in and the possible dangers it can present to both these publics and individual users.

Warner (2002) defines counterpublics as not only opposing a dominant discourse, but as also reconfiguring speech genres, modes of address, and hierarchy among media. Thinking about how certain trends and platform conventions emerge on TikTok, I relate this conceptualization to Gibbs et al.'s concept of platform vernacular (2015) according to which "each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics" (p. 257). Similar to how a counterpublic in Warner's description "appears to be open to indefinite strangers, but in fact selects participants by criteria of shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms (including idiolects or speech genres)" (p. 75), the ways in which users interact and engage on a specific platform are marked by "a combination of communication practices, conventions, and registers of meaning and affect, which emerge from platform affordances and their mundane,

everyday enactment in practice" (Tiidenberg et al., 2021, p. 45). Thus, relating Warner's concept to the concept of platform vernaculars allows me to reflect on how communities form through specific ways of engaging with certain content.

Further, Berlant's concept of intimate publics (2008) provides additional perspective on the affective attachments that bring people together on TikTok. Berlant argues that intimate publics are formed of consumers that are expected to already share a "worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (p. viii). Centred around shared aesthetics and affective attachments, intimate publics provide "a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general" which serves as a "place of recognition and reflection" for its consumers (p. viii). At the same time, I consider Berlant's idea of the juxtapolitical (2008) which describes how intimate publics exist in proximity to the political but act "as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough" (Berlant, 2008, p. x). I examine to what extent the publics forming around sad girl music are juxtapolitical and what their potential is to overcome this juxtapolitical realm and to reflect on and shape possible alternate futures through political consciousness and action.

Fan Studies & Music Fandom Spaces on TikTok

For fan and listening communities, the FYP algorithm and the sound feature open new ways of engaging with music and one another. Because music is so central to TikTok, the platform is particularly conducive as a gathering place for music fandoms. Fandom has long been an essential factor for the music industry, as well as other forms of cultural production, both in terms of profits and cultural relevance, but has also often been dismissed. Particularly when it comes to young female fans, often referred to as fangirls, media discourses have often been patronising or even misogynistic, treating fangirls as silly or pathologized (Lynskey, 2013; Tiffany, 2022). One might only have to think of Beatlemania of the 1960s, or One Direction fandom in the 2010s, to conjure this image of the screaming fangirl. While public perception of fandom has changed in recent years to become more positive (J. Williams, 2024), due to these often-negative connotations previously applied to fandom, "fans' role in shaping our present culture, politics, and social life is often [still] over looked" (Tiffany, 2022, p. 8). In her book *Everything I need I get from you: how fangirls created the Internet as we know it*, Tiffany (2022) argues that fandoms and fandom practices have played a significant role in shaping contemporary internet and social media practices. At the same time, new platforms are also impacting fandom through the affordances

they provide or the behaviours they limit. Thus, consideration of fandom is essential to understanding how people are engaging with music on TikTok both as a form of identity construction and community building.

Drawing on earlier work in audience and cultural studies, fan studies started emerging in the 1990s with the publications of books such as Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992) and Lisa Lewis's collection *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (1992) that argued for the legitimacy and importance of critical inquiries of fandom and introduced conceptualizations of fandom as a potential "source of empowerment in struggles against oppressive ideologies and the unsatisfactory circumstances of everyday life" (Lewis, 1992, p. 3). While these founding texts pre-exist the current social media environment, they provide an important framework for thinking about how participation in fandom can be an important part of identity formation and meaning making. As Grossberg writes: "Fans' investment in certain practices and texts provides them with strategies which enable them to gain a certain amount of control over their affective life, which further enables them to invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and identity in order to cope with new forms of pain, pessimism, frustration, alienation, terror and boredom" (1992, pp. 64–65). It is this potential for empowerment, both on an individual and a collective level, that my analysis will pay particular attention to.

Looking more specifically at the potential of fandom for queer people, Valentine's (1995) study of lesbian audiences' engagement with k. d. lang's music further illustrates "not only the power of music to articulate sexual identities and communities but also its ability to facilitate the production of sexualized space, in this case queer spaces" (p. 474). In this context, being a fan of something presents possibilities for identity formation, as well as for finding queer community as exemplified by the practice of hinting at sexuality through association with particular artists. As Smyth (1993, cited in Valentine, 1995, p. 480) writes "the question 'Do you like k. d. lang?' [has become] one, if not the, litmus test of a woman's sexuality." Similarly, the question "do you listen to girl in red?," referencing the music of Norwegian indie-pop artist Marie Ulven who goes by the stage name girl in red, recently became a way for queer people on TikTok to disclose their own and inquire about others' queerness (Kim, 2021).

For queer fans especially, fan studies scholarship thus reveals how the internet and social media, particularly tumblr and more recently TikTok, have thus long been spaces for engaging in fan reception practices and articulating "queer utopianism" (Anselmo, 2018, p. 90).

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has provided an overview of the key areas of scholarship that this thesis draws on. I have traced the sad girl music term through early 2010s sad girl cultures online and explored the rise of girlhood discourses in recent years. I introduced the concept of platformization and charted TikTok's relation to and impact on the music industry. And finally, I discussed conceptualizations of publics, looked at how publics form on TikTok, and outlined the field of fandom studies. Put together, this literature provides a basis for the following chapters. It is from this point that I will now move into my analysis of sad girl music.

Chapter 3: "Sapphic Songs that Defined Your Music Taste as 'Yearning'": Platformization's Impact on Sad Girl Music

Walking down the street, I am rarely without music in my ears. Headphones on and a smart phone with a music streaming service subscription in hand, I have an almost unimaginable array of music at my fingertips at all times. This everyday experience of listening to music today vastly differs from the average music listening experience of even 20 years ago. With the digital music revolution already underway since the late 1990s but smart phones and streaming services just starting to emerge in the late 2000s, online music distribution in the 2000s was still largely dominated by the transfer of physical media like CDs into digital formats, peer-to-peer file-sharing networks like Napster, and digital download stores like the iTunes Store. In the 2010s, the popularity of these distribution methods started to be overtaken by streaming services, such as Spotify, which provide access to a huge catalogue of music on a subscription basis.

As the variety of vinyl records, CDs, and cassettes that may still coexist on a living room shelf shows, changes in music formats are not a new thing. However, as Jonathan Sterne posits in his book *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (2012), "format denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience, and workings of a medium" (p. 7). Thus, engaging critically with not just the medium of music but its specific format is essential as it allows us to think about "smaller registers like infrastructures, international corporate consortia, and whole technical systems" (Sterne, 2012, p. 11). Format influences how music is experienced, how it is discussed, as well as the context it is produced in. Considering that streaming services are the current dominant format for music consumption, this chapter contextualizes sad girl music within the contemporary music industry landscape dominated by streaming services and platforms. It carries out a case study analysis of Spotify's popular "sad girl starter pack" playlist (Spotify, n.d.), highlighting how the discourses around sad girl music are impacted by the interplay of platforms and users, and how the platformization of music at large is increasingly shaping approaches to music consumption. Considering Spotify's increasing curatorial power in setting global listening agendas through its organization of music (Bonini & Gandini, 2019), mainstream understandings of sad girl music and its listeners are shaped by the music's representation in this commodified platform context, which in turn may affect engagements with sad girl music in other social media spaces. Further, while music consumption has always been tied to identity (e.g., rock music functioning as a form of rebellion against parents (Nealon, 2018, p. 16)), through the

platformization of music, and through streaming services' use of recommender systems to categorize users, identity has become one of the central facets that music consumption is shaped around. In addition, music is increasingly framed as mood- and/or activity-specific, bringing affect to the forefront of music consumption. This contextualization of sad girl music within the current context of a music industry dominated by platforms grounds my subsequent analysis of sad girl music, allowing me to subsequently better understand the place of identity, emotions, and affects in queer youths' engagements with the music on TikTok.

Impact of Curatorial Work & Playlisting on the 'Sad Girl Music' Term

The recent increase in popularity of sad girl music as a term exposes a strong tension between music and artists that aim to reflect on and counter societal expectations, and that oftentimes criticize the use of the term to describe their music, and the music industry's commodification of female sadness and generalization of emotions (Garcia-Furtado, 2022; Geisel, 2021; Martoccio, 2021; Reitsma, 2023). Much of what the artists are criticizing about the sad girl music term is epitomized in the popular Spotify-curated playlist "sad girl starter pack" (Spotify, n.d.), which exemplifies the (male-dominated) music industry's generalization and commodification of female emotion. Featuring 75 songs and a description that, at the time of writing (December 2023), reads "Sapphic songs that defined your music taste as 'yearning,'" the playlist ascribes a specific conception of identity to both its listeners and the featured artists that is focused on queerness and sadness, as well as highly gendered. Containing multiple songs each by boygenius and Mitski, as well as solo songs by Phoebe Bridgers and Lucy Dacus, among a variety of other artists, the playlist with its over 1.5 million likes thus represents the mainstream understanding of sad girl music, and reveals the ways in which platforms like Spotify shape and reconfigure the consumption, organization, and experience of music. My focus here lies on Spotify due to its leadership in music streaming services with 602 million monthly listeners and 10 million Premium subscribers as of the fourth quarter of 2023 (Spangler, 2024). Taking a closer look at Spotify's "sad girl starter pack" playlist illustrates how streaming platforms are setting "listening agendas" for their global user bases, exerting influence both on what music accrues popularity and on how that music comes to be positioned within broader discourses.

The "sad girl starter pack" playlist exemplifies how Spotify shapes music consumption and popularity through their curatorial work (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 2). Combining "human activity 'augmented' by algorithms and non-human activity designed, monitored, and edited by

humans" (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 6), Bonini & Gandini argue that music streaming platforms have become the "'new gatekeepers' of an industry previously dominated by human intermediaries such as radio programmers, journalists, and other experts" (2019, p. 2). This curatorial work is most clearly visible in Spotify's focus on playlists that has in many ways dislocated the previous organization of music around albums, highlighting the importance of format to shaping music consumption (Pelly, 2017, 2018; Prey, 2020). Spotify's interface puts playlists at the forefront and prominently features popular playlists like "New Music Friday" or "Today's Top Hits" on many users' home page. Generally, playlists on Spotify can be categorized into user-curated playlists that can be kept private or made public to other users, playlists curated by record labels that aim to promote the artists signed to the record label, brand-sponsored playlists, and Spotify-curated playlists, with the latter of those being the most prominent ones (Prey, 2020, p. 3). While ostensibly meant to facilitate music discovery, focusing on playlists curated by the platform presents an important strategy for Spotify to wield power and influence music consumption, considering the platform does not hold the rights to the music it features (Eriksson, 2020, p. 419). In this vein, Prey (2020) describes playlists as an example of "'curatorial power': the capacity to advance one's own interests, and affect the interests of others, through the organizing and programming of content" (p. 8), as it allows Spotify to set listening agendas for its users.

A playlist such as the "sad girl starter pack" with its close to 1.5 million likes thus impacts how the music included on it comes to be perceived and categorized under the sad girl label, while also offering visibility to the artists. As Bonini and Gandini (2019) write, "the platformization of music curation imposes therefore new 'regimes of visibility' (Bucher, 2012) and intensifies what Bucher (2018) calls the 'threat of invisibility': algorithms and curators decide and discipline the visibility of an artist within the platform" (p. 7). While inclusion on the playlist can thus provide a huge boost in visibility and consequently listeners to artists, it can also box them into specific categories and force them "to negotiate relationships with digital culture and platforms, dependent on goals, features, and business models of the platform" (Morris, 2020, p. 2). Though music streaming platforms can hence help an artist achieve success, this success is predicated on an unequal dynamic between artists and platforms that requires artists to conform to certain norms set by the platforms.

"sad girl starter pack"

In analyzing the Spotify-curated "sad girl starter pack" playlist and examining the title, description, and cover image, it becomes visible how these specific corporate, platformed representations draw on expressions of queerness and sadness while simultaneously shaping mainstream understandings of sad girl music as a genre. Starting with the title, the use of the term "starter pack" suggests that the objective of the playlist is to represent the fundamentals of the so-called sad girl music genre. Starter packs are a popular meme format that most commonly consists of images accompanied by a title creating connections between the images and that aims to illustrate a "prototype of a cultural artifact, member of a community, or shared experience" (Eschler & Menking, 2018, p. 2). In short, starter packs aim to convey characteristics of a certain type of person (identified through the title) by associating them with specific objects (represented in the images) (Urban Dictionary, n.d.-c). Eschler and Menking (2018) use the concept of social identity work to "refer to the construction of identities for groups of people" (p. 2) that is carried out through these memes. Even though the playlist does not fulfil the typical characteristics of the meme format but only uses the term "starter pack" in the title, it nonetheless engages in the same kind of social identity work due to the meme's ubiquity. The title thus clearly suggests an aim of providing listeners with the fundamentals of sad girl music, claiming authority on the 'genre's' definition, while simultaneously associating the music included on the playlist with a specific listener base.

The listener base is further stereotyped through the imagery used for the playlist's cover, which could also be considered as an unconventional take on the starter pack meme template (Figure 3-1). A collage consisting of multiple images in muted colours, the imagery depicts cut off faces of largely female presenting people. Featuring a pair of boots that seem to be Dr. Martens, a person with a septum piercing, and a person facing away from the camera wearing a beanie, the imagery contains multiple markers that are often associated with

Figure 3-1: "sad girl starter pack" playlist cover image

queer women (Mukherjee, n.d.; Nina, 2014; O, 2015; Urban Dictionary, n.d.-b; Zygan, 2021). For example, as I will explore further in the following chapter, multiple TikToks in my data collection referred to Dr. Martens boots as a unifying marker of boygenius fans, many (most) of whom are queer. In addition, one of the images shows a person with a somewhat sad or wistful expression on their face, and a grainy filter combined with the muted colours gives the collage an almost analog look that conveys a sense of nostalgia, thus creating a mood that revels in sadness in a way. While not directly referencing any album covers by artists associated with the genre, the playlist cover image draws on aesthetics and symbolisms of queerness and sadness prominent within sad girl and queer cultures online.

Finally, the playlist's description "Sapphic songs that defined your music taste as 'yearning'" also takes up queerness and emotions as central to its content and listener base. Taking all these elements together, the Spotify "sad girl starter pack" playlist thus creates an image of sad girl music that builds on and engages with internet cultures without citing them explicitly. This vagueness addresses people already versed in these cultures, while also not alienating those new to the music and associated aesthetics. This utilization of the aesthetics and symbols can both be viewed as valorizing them and as simultaneously commodifying and stereotyping sad girl culture. Considering how the sad girl term has at times been used in a derogatory way and how starter pack memes are built on stereotypes, which have at times been called out for being racist, and are generally reductive even when not being particularly malicious (Kiberd, 2018), the "sad girl starter pack" can also be understood as dismissive of the music and aesthetics, even while profiting off them.

The playlist thus portrays itself as an arbiter of the sad girl music genre through the use of the term starter pack, and, considering its popularity at close to 1.5 million likes, for many listeners it does represent a first encounter with the sad girl music term. In this way, mainstream understandings of sad girl music and its listeners are shaped by the genre's representation in the commodified platform context of Spotify, which can then impact how the music is engaged with in other social media spaces.

Categorization of Users and Artists: Music Consumption as Identity-Defining

As the use of the starter pack meme shows, an essential part of Spotify's shaping of discourses and understandings of sad girl music is its association of sad girl music listeners with distinct identities. For platforms and the advertising industry, categorization of both content and

users is highly useful as it allows them to "target or exclude certain groups more easily, tailor their services to users, and increase their attention levels" (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021, p. 1). As discussed above, the "sad girl starter pack" playlist's use of sad girl culture symbols imagines a specific audience. The description of the music as "sapphic songs" engages in this user categorization by explicitly associating the music with queerness and particularly queer women, thus clearly targeting a specific demographic. At the time of writing (January 2024), the first song on the playlist is "we fell in love in october" by girl in red, who I mentioned in the previous chapter. Considering that a song's position on a playlist has an impact on determining its visibility, as well as creating "a cultural hierarchy of importance of those songs" (Bonini and Gandini, 2019, p. 7), the song's placement reflects the centrality of queerness to the playlist's conception of sad girl music.

By focusing on individualized music discovery, curation, and increasing emphasis on mood-based playlists, Spotify aims to position music streaming as "a deeply personal and intimate—even happiness-inducing—practice" (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 136). But this personalization is dependent upon a quantification of taste that categorizes users into specific taste profiles (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 129) that, in fact, prescribe specific notions of the streaming user and shape user behaviours. Many platforms "employ automated recognition methods to presume user preferences, sensitive attributes such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and opinions" (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021, p. 1), allowing them to categorize users in certain ways with little to no say by the user of how their personal data is used and how their "identity" is categorized. This shows how platforms don't just identify consumers, but actively "mold and manufacture categories of consumers," thus shaping identity categories more broadly (Bivens & Haimson, 2016, p. 2). In the example of the "sad girl starter pack" playlist, this shaping of identity categories and user behaviours is particularly visible in regard to gender. Starting from the title containing the term 'girl,' the playlist very explicitly positions gender and femininity—as well as sexuality with the term 'sapphic'—as central to the assumed listener base. With the artists commonly associated with sad girl music and featured on the playlist being majority female-identifying and/or queer, they are generally assumed to mainly be "relatable to other queer or female-identifying people" (Nicholas, 2023) in a way that differs from how male artists touching on similar topics are perceived. A study by Eriksson et al. found that the "overwhelming majority of Spotify's recommended artists were male" (2019, p. 126), which reflects the music industry's double

standard where male artists are assumed to have universal appeal—exemplified by the inclusion of male artists/bands such as Arctic Monkeys or The Smiths on the 'sad girl starter pack' playlist—whereas queer female artists are assumed to mainly appeal to queer female listeners. Due to the visibility provided by inclusion in playlists, Spotify's recommender system may thus contribute to maintaining gender inequalities making it harder for non-male artists to find success within the music industry.

Considering that not all artists featured openly identify as queer (e.g., Mitski has not publicly discussed her sexuality), let alone as women (e.g., all-male bands such as Arctic Monkey or The Smiths), this raises questions about the playlist's curation process. As touched on above, platforms like Spotify increasingly use a combination of human editorial choices and algorithmically-driven curation for their playlists that Bonini and Gandini term "algo-torial" (Bonini & Gandini, 2019). Through platformization, music curation becomes increasingly shaped by data-intense automation processes "transforming audience attention into data and data into commodities" (Bonini and Gandini, 2019, p. 9). This importance of data is most clearly illustrated in Spotify's recommender system. While Spotify started out as a platform meant to provide users access to the music they already knew and wanted to listen to, from 2013 onwards, the company started to reshape their service toward becoming a "producer of unique music-related experiences" (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 67). This "curatorial turn" was marked by the acquisition of The Echo Nest, a data and music intelligence platform known for powering Spotify's algorithmic recommendations (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 64). In order to make curated playlists and recommendations feel "relevant and personal" (Hodgson, 2021, p. 8), the algorithmic recommender system uses collaborative filtering to analyse and compare individual user behaviour, natural language processing that analyses large volumes of texts such as music criticism to "recognise similarities and differences between artists," and audio analysis to "automatically identify fundamental similarities and differences between songs and index them against the kind of human behavioural patterns identified through collaborative filtering" (Hodgson, 2021, p. 6). Together, these three main techniques allow Spotify to sort user behaviour into metadata that can be "used to calculate every song and artist's degree of relevance to each individual" (Hodgson, 2021, p. 7).

In this context, one can assume that the presence of male and non-queer artists on the "sad girl starter pack" playlist is due to the algorithmic recommender systems that quantify user inputs

into specific taste profiles (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 129). However, with taste profiles being "mapped against wider 'cultural knowledge' about how those artists are described online, and the characteristics of their music" (such as "mainstreamness," "freshness," "diversity," and "hotness")" (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 129), it also bears consideration whether discourses that emerge on TikTok may influence how music gets categorized and recommended on Spotify. For example, TikTok videos by mainly young women and girls are increasingly discussing The Smiths for their songs' seeming understanding of girlhood. One such TikTok, posted in February 2024, reads on screen "why does morrissey know what it's like to be a girl in her 20's?". These videos create links between music by The Smiths and sad girl culture. This opens the question whether the current inclusion of the band's songs on the "sad girl starter pack" playlist was impacted by TikTok discourses, and/or whether inclusion on the playlist may have led listeners to creating these TikToks. Although investigating that question goes beyond the scope of this thesis, it points to the complex entwinement of the platformization of music, social media discourses, and perceptions of 'sad girl music' more broadly. Considering the impact of the platform's recommender systems, it bears consideration of what structures and values are underlying these processes and how the categorization of both users and artists does not just predict already established taste but also alters tastes and influences how identity is conceptualized in relation to music consumption.

Spotify Wrapped: Personal User Data, Hyperindividualization, and Authenticity

Spotify's utilization of users' personal data in features like the annual "Spotify Wrapped" further illustrates its impact on reconfiguring music consumption as an expression of taste and individual authenticity. The "sad girl starter pack" playlist's description as "Sapphic songs that defined your music taste as "yearning"" specifies identity conception by referencing the ways in which the platform's annual "Spotify Wrapped" sorts users into categories based on their listening behaviours. Though slightly different in its focus each year, "Spotify Wrapped" sums up datafied music consumption by assigning users certain adverbs and listening characters, such as "yearning" or "shapeshifting" (Spotify Newsroom, 2023). Released yearly since 2016, what started as a marketing campaign for Spotify that provided users with lists of their most listened to artists, songs, albums, and genres on the platform has become a much-anticipated event in early December, which provides huge amounts of user-generated marketing for the platform as users share their personal data formatted for Instagram stories. While the collection of personal user data is often seen critically, features like Spotify Wrapped simultaneously rely on hyper-

individualization – allowing users to see themselves and their music taste as unique – as well as allowing them to feel shared connections with other users ascribed similar characteristics. As shown by Spotify's yearly boost in app store rankings following the release of Spotify Wrapped (Compoli, 2020), users are embracing the categorization and publication of their personal data.

This phenomenon relates back to Nealon's argument about the centrality of authenticity to the consumption of popular music. While in the mid-twentieth century, authenticity as a descriptor of music mainly functioned as countercultural against the mainstream, Nealon argues that, today, authenticity functions as "a linchpin practice of contemporary American subject-formation" (2018, p. 8). Music consumption and the sense of personal musical taste are thus integral to authentic identity formation, signifying freedom and individuality, while also being the mark of a well-disciplined subject under neoliberalism. In this context where individuality and authenticity hold such importance, users' enthusiasm to view and post the personal data of their music consumption becomes an expression of not only taste, but of identity and belonging (Beer, 2024), as I explore further in my TikTok analysis .

While some users express privacy concerns around Spotify's data collection, the overarchingly positive reaction to Spotify Wrapped can be looked at in the context of self-tracking practices and the concept of technologies of the self "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Though Foucault's exploration traces the concern of the self as a form of self-improvement all the way back to Ancient Greece, this concern with quantifying the self has become particularly popularized through contemporary practices of using digital technologies to monitor, measure, and record a variety of data about the self with the underlying aim of self-improvement or self-reflection (Lupton, 2016). Thus, examining engagements with Spotify Wrapped through the literature on datafication and quantification of the self (Lupton, 2016; Neff & Nafus, 2016) provides a deeper understanding of how people come to understand themselves through data collected on their music consumption practices. Similar to how the use of a digital device to track one's sleep is meant to provide users with quantified knowledge about themselves that may theoretically allow them to optimize their sleep, Spotify tracking music consumption data and presenting it back to the user provides users with quantified knowledge on their music taste. Even though, in both cases, users

may have an overarching idea of the quality of their sleep and their music consumption, digital technologies now provide quantified data to back up their experiences which can be used for self-representation purposes, and which may contribute to a perception of deeper knowledge of the self. In this way, (self-)tracking and data collection come to be part of how the self is understood. By having music consumption documented in data by the platform, it becomes a quantifiable part of identity that can be recognized by others, thus validating one's fandom and presenting a coherent narrative of identity (Purcell, 2024). At the same time, in having one's music taste "defined as 'yearning,'" Spotify Wrapped can affirm individual emotions and the authenticity of one's engagement with emotional music. It provides "proof" of listeners' sadness, highlighting the desire to have one's emotions be recognized as part of one's identity. Thus, in listening to a playlist such as the "sad girl starter pack," audiences are not only given easy access to music, but are provided a means of constructing and representing their identity, even while this identity is shaped by Spotify's conception of what it means to be a listener of sad girl music.

Music Consumption as Mood-/Activity-Specific

At the same time, music streaming services posit music as increasingly mood and activity specific. Spotify's focus on playlists facilitates a "'lean back' customer experience where users are encouraged to consume editorial playlists rather than actively browsing for tracks" (Eriksson, 2020, p. 415). By offering editorial playlists built around certain emotions, moods, or activities, Spotify provides its users with music specifically targeted to their habits and mindsets (Eriksson, 2020, p. 420), alleviating the 'work' of choosing music fit for such moods and activities. Instead of having to curate their own playlists of sad songs, users can play the "sad girl starter pack" to accompany their emotions. Simultaneously, this organization of music allows Spotify to use these playlists as sources of advertising revenue as advertisers can specifically be matched to playlists fitting their product (such as pairing ads for cleaning products to a playlist like Spotify's "Cleaning Mix") (Eriksson, 2020, p. 420).

The emphasis on music consumption as mood-setting is particularly visible in the Spotify Daylist feature. Launched in September 2023, the Spotify Daylist presents users with algorithmically generated playlists three times a day with ultra-specific titles like "solitude melancholy sunday evening" or "Tailspin Self-Sabotaging Monday Afternoon." Due to the playfulness and specificity of many of these playlist titles, many users feel compelled to post them on their social media platforms as a form of self-representation, creating organic marketing for

Spotify while allowing "for a more thorough understanding of an individual through music" (Rojas, 2024) similar to the self-tracking practices described above. At the same time, the Spotify Daylist feature demonstrates changes in approaches to music consumption and the increasing focus on ubiquitous listening. Each new iteration of the Daylist offers background sound for a specific time and situation, turning music consumption into something that accompanies certain moods and activities while also privileging "specific ways of thinking, feeling, and acting" (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 123). Most often, the focus of Spotify-generated playlists is on mood enhancement as a tool to increase productivity. According to Eriksson et al., even when titled in different ways, most mood-focused playlists evoke "fantasies of one specific state of mind and the moral values that come with it: happiness" (2019, p. 124), reflecting societal understandings of happiness as a matter of social good.

Over the past few decades, there has been an increasing focus on happiness as a social good that governments and countries should strive to achieve for their populations (Ahmed, 2010, p. 3). Similarly, whole fields of happiness studies have developed for example within economics and psychology. Terms such as "the happiness industry" (Davies, 2015) and "the happiness agenda" (Segal, 2017) have emerged to denote these associations of happiness with the economy and with politics. In these ways, happiness becomes seen as "a way of measuring progress; happiness, we might say is, the ultimate performance indicator" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 4). In connection with the abundance of mood-enhancing playlists on Spotify that are similarly focused on productivity and performance, these conceptions of happiness reiterate the aforementioned emphasis on the individual as capable of and responsible for managing their emotions, reinforcing narratives of success, productivity, and personhood that become intertwined with happiness for both the state and capitalism. At first glance, mood-enhancing playlists portray a more utilitarian approach to music, regarding music consumption through a functional lens (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 123) that stands in seeming contradiction to the notion of music taste as tied to identity construction. However, the focus on individual responsibility in fact reinforces these links to identity where using music for self-improvement becomes part of what it means to be a successful, happy person. These narratives promote happiness as a universal good that is the object of human desire (Ahmed, 2010, p. 1), with happiness becoming a responsibility, a duty for individuals to achieve, and Spotify's playlists can be a tool to that end.

The "sad girl starter pack" stands in seeming contradiction to these happiness-focused playlists. Instead of aiming to improve mood, it counters the happiness imperative by reveling in sadness. However, this particular conception of (female) sadness is not necessarily subversive but rather represents a different way of using moods for economic purposes by commodifying negative emotions and affective experiences. The term "yearning" in the playlist's description reveals that, even while negative emotions are seemingly embraced, the focus is still on the hope for better/different things, pointing toward a mindset that remains oriented around certain conceptions of happiness markers. Even though the playlist focuses on negative feelings, these are regarded as part of the "yearning" for something else, thus implicitly maintaining the focus on good life fantasies and happiness markers even while the impossibility of their achievement is lamented. While not as explicitly time and activity specific as the Daylist, the "sad girl starter pack" also approaches music consumption as mood specific.

Commodification of Sadness

The focus on emotions like "sadness" and "yearning" in the title and description of the sad girl starter pack playlist posits it not just as associated with a specific audience, but also as accompaniment for specific moods and emotions. In doing so, it lumps together music from several genres that addresses a variety of emotions into one conceptualization of female sadness. Female and queer artists whose music tackles emotionality and sometimes, but not always, "embodies mellow and melancholic vibes" are categorized under the "sad girl" banner (Nicholas, 2023), subsuming expressions of various emotions into sadness. This "takes away from the individual, unique lyrical message each artist and song is attempting to say" (Nicholas, 2023) and exemplifies how engagements with female emotions are focused on sadness and pain in a largely superficial way that does not question root causes but often aestheticizes and commodifies female sadness, leaving little space for other emotions or messages. Instead, the playlist's focus on emotional music is "meant to create an enduring mood," a "solipsistic sadness that is static, and, therefore, comforting" (Levis, 2022). In this way, it takes agency away from the artists and turns their emotions into a commodity (Cills, 2018). Taking aim at the descriptor, Lucy Dacus tweeted: "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, 2021c). Despite this criticism leveled by artists prominently featured on the sad girl starter pack playlist

against the ways in which the term classifies and commodifies female emotions, the enduring popularity of the "sad girl starter pack" playlist illustrates Spotify's ongoing instrumentalization of identity categories and of emotions as moods. It highlights how platformization and the organization of music around playlists reconfigures music as mood- and activity specific. While the mood-regulating properties of music have long been recognized (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007), platformization and playlisting put them to the forefront as it simplifies access to mood-specific music while simultaneously giving platforms increased power over the categorization of music into moods. Considering that algorithmic categories need to be rigid to work according to the binary logic of computing, platformed music leaves little room for the nuance that many of the artists associate with their work beyond the label of sadness.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have explored sad girl music in the platform contexts of streaming services like Spotify, demonstrating some ways in which platformization is influencing how music is discussed and consumed. My analysis of the Spotify-created "sad girl starter pack" playlist particularly illustrates how discourses and mainstream understandings of sad girl music and its listeners are shaped by platform representations and how approaches to music consumption are increasingly focused on identity and mood-accompaniment.

Music streaming platforms' curatorial work and playlisting are increasingly setting listening agendas that are not only impacting music's commercial success, but are also themselves impacted by music's circulation and success on other platforms like TikTok, which has become a major factor for music discovery. While this can make it possible for musicians to find commercial success if their song is added to a popular Spotify playlist or goes viral on TikTok, this success is predicated on adapting to the platform environment and accepting their music being categorized and represented in ways decided on by platforms. The "sad girl starter pack" playlist with its close to 1.5 million listeners contributes to the music's popularization, but, considering this popularity, it also claims authority on defining the genre and mainstream understandings of it. Platformization of music has increasingly associated music consumption with personal identity and the embodiment of one's authentic self. Spotify's categorization of listeners into distinct taste profiles is not only tolerated, but often embraced by users, who use it as an identity marker for self-representation purposes. At the same time, the organization of music around playlists increasingly

frames music as mood-setting, reinforcing narratives of productivity and happiness, and simplifying music to specific subsets of feelings.

Overarchingly, this study of the platformization of music provides context for my analysis of TikToks engaging with sad girl music. My analysis of the playlist has provided an understanding of music consumption as an expression of identity that will be taken back up in the next chapter's exploration of identity expressions in sad girl music TikToks. I will examine how the engagements with and representations of sad girl music in the TikToks align with or diverge from the ways in which the music is conceptualized in the Spotify "sad girl starter pack" playlist on the one hand, and musicians' discussions of the term on the other.

Chapter 4: "common denominator: you're gay": Identity Construction, Queer Fandom Practices, and Publics in the Platform Context

One TikTok posted in October 2023 shows a 23-year-old lesbian user humorously discussing "what your favourite lucy dacus album says about you" with the post's caption stating: "common denominator: you're gay." Set to a song by Lucy Dacus, a member of boygenius, this TikTok employs familiar fandom practices that link enjoyment of a certain cultural artifact to identity, explicitly associating listening to Lucy Dacus' music with queer identities. With images of the respective album cover behind her, the creator describes specific life experiences that ostensibly relate to choosing a certain album as one's favourite. Centered around queer awakenings (*No Burden*), questioning a religious upbringing (*Historian*), and complicated relations to a hometown (*Home Video*), these descriptions engage with overarching themes present in the respective albums, thus displaying the creator's knowledge about and deep engagement with the music. As such, the TikTok constructs identity on multiple different levels. First, through the caption referring to a "common denominator" applicable to all fans of the music, it constructs a collective sad girl music fan identity based in relatability. Second, the differentiation of what each individual album "says about you" and the engagement with different life experiences provides space for individual identity constructions in which music can accompany queer life narratives and help with coming to a deeper understanding of oneself and one's experiences. Third, by making use of the familiar fandom practice of proclaiming a 'favourite,' but associating it with queerness, it constructs identity both alongside and against oftentimes heteronormative mainstream fandom practices. Looking at my TikTok dataset as a whole, identity constructions reappear in these three dimensions of collective fan identity, individual identity focused on queer life narratives, and identity in relation to mainstream discourses and practices.

Building on the previous chapter's illustration of platformization's increasing influence on discourses around music and its emphasis on identity and mood as central to music consumption, this chapter reveals the ways in which TikTok facilitates new avenues for identity construction and community-formation for young queer people in fandom spaces who utilize the platform's affordances to find community, explore and express their own identities and queerness, and subvert and queer mainstream trends and fandom practices. In the following pages, I explore the different dimensions of these identity constructions in detail. First, by addressing each word within the sad girl music term, I examine how the collective construction of a coherent sad girl music fan identity

both provides queer youth with a feeling of recognition and community, while also being potentially limiting, particularly when this collective identity conception becomes influenced by outside entities like brands. Second, by looking specifically at the focus on lesbian identity and at queer identity expressions, I analyse how individuals navigate and construct queer identities alongside music which provides representation of queer life narratives. Third, by assessing depictions of boygenius as analogous to boy bands, and the queering of commonly heteronormative fandom practices and mainstream platform trends and discourses, I study how identity is constructed simultaneously alongside and against the mainstream and can provide an entry to queerness. Finally, while they only represent a small subset of my data collection, I consider the consequences and impacts of when identity constructions become too dependent on artists and parasocial relations by looking at discussions of problems within the fandom and toxic fandom discourses.

Overarchingly, this chapter contends with the centrality of identity to queer youth's engagements with sad girl music on TikTok. On social media, identifying as a fan has long been a way to construct one's identity. People construct their identity through association with music, celebrities, and cultural artifacts, using these associations to both understand their own identity and to express it to the outside world. As Grossberg (1992) writes: "the fan gives authority to that which he or she invests in, letting the object of such investments speak for and as him or her self" (p. 59). While the centrality of identity in fandom practices is thus not new or limited to sad girl music on TikTok, queer youth's engagements with the music on the platform reiterate how, shaped by TikTok's affordances and features, music fandom practices are an important part of identity-formation and expression, and being a fan of openly queer artists like boygenius can especially serve as explorations and expressions of queer identity and sexuality.

Fandom Identity: Collective Construction of "the Sad Girl Music Fan"

In the TikToks in my dataset, music functions as a tool for constructing identity. Engaging with the music, users position themselves as fans of boygenius/Mitski/sad girl music more broadly. More than just signifying their individual enjoyment of the music, these self-identifications often invoke specific identity markers, which in turn serve as objects of recognition between fans and contribute to the construction of a broader, collective 'sad girl music fan' identity. At large, this identity construction revolves around emotions and mental health, queerness, sexuality, and shared affective objects associated with the music.

This construction of a coherent sad girl music fan identity is facilitated by the repetition of certain recurring discourses, attributes, and conventions or formats of posts. One TikTok published in October 2023, featuring a song from boygenius's EP *the rest*, shows a person going from smiling at the camera to screaming in reaction to the release of the new music (cf. Figure 4-1). The text overlaid on this video reads, "boygenius can't be making music like this when 90% of their listeners are single, queer, and mentally ill." The TikTok not only conveys the creator's appreciation for and emotional reaction to the music, but also more broadly correlates listening to boygenius with being single, queer, and mentally ill. With many TikToks similarly associating boygenius to queerness and sadness while invoking a community of listeners, these expressions engage in practices of collective identity construction. While there are some variations in the kinds of identities depicted and how they are constructed, the TikToks in my dataset overarchingly conceptualize the sad girl music fan as a young queer woman or nonbinary person struggling with mental health issues who relates to the music on an emotional level. Although there are some overlaps, I parse these collective identity constructions by looking at the individual elements of the 'sad girl music' term: sadness and the performance of emotions, gender, and relations to music.

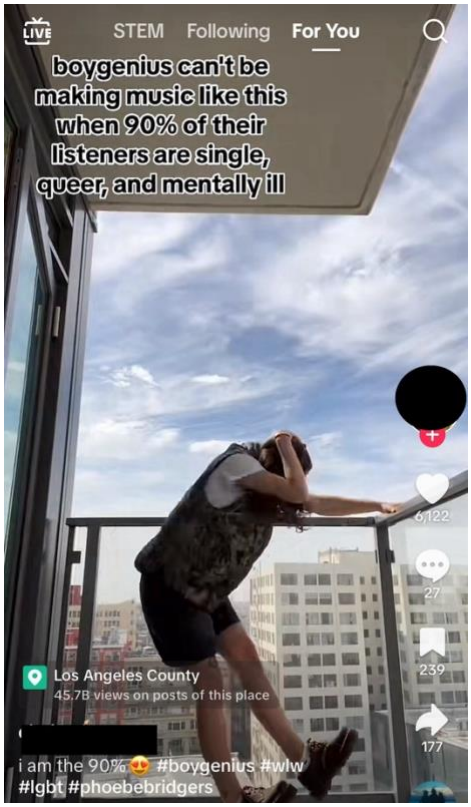

Figure 4-1: TikTok describing 90% of boygenius listeners as "single, queer, and mentally ill"

SAD girl music: Reaction Videos & the Performance of Emotions

With 'sad' being the first word in the sad girl music term, expressions of emotions are central to how identity is expressed and constructed in my dataset. Shaped by broader fandom practices and TikTok's platform vernacular, the most common format of sad girl music TikToks are videos of users showing themselves emotionally reacting to (newly released) music (cf. Figure 4-2). The repetitions within this format exemplify how emotions online are created through their enactment, and how these expressions of emotions function as collective identity construction. The focus on identity within sad girl music TikToks is deeply intertwined with the centrality of authenticity to both the consumption of popular music specifically (Nealon, 2018), and to social media more broadly (Taylor, 2022). Marwick (2013) conceptualizes authenticity "as a somewhat ineffable quality that overlaps with ideals of truthfulness, consistency, and caring" (p. 6). Identity expressions on TikTok are thus built on the presentation of an authentic self—a true, unfiltered version of one's identity—and the emotional reactions of many sad girl music TikToks exemplify this desire to portray one's raw, emotional self.

Figure 4-2: Emotional Reaction Video Example

Reaction videos commonly use the TikTok sound feature to incorporate the song that is being reacted to, while the visual shows the creator's face, often crying or expressing emotions in other ways, and singing along to lyrics, with text overlaying the video itself (cf. **Error! Reference source not found.**). One TikTok, set to the boygenius song "Voyager" features the text "there is no way boygenius wrote the lines 'i wanna live a vibrant life/but i wanna die a boring death' and expected me to be remotely okay afterwards." Quoting lines from the song's lyrics, the creator draws attention to the part of the song that affected them most emotionally. Although the post implicates the band's knowledge of the impact their work would have on audiences' mental states, the video's tone conveys the unlikelihood of the TikTok's creator actually believing the band was thinking about them while writing these lines, rather meaning it satirically. Nonetheless, the band's implication parallels the language of other posts that similarly address artists directly as an expression of intense emotions. In my dataset, expressions of outrage at the artists for the power of their music to elicit negative emotions are particularly common. Assertions such as "MITSKI HOW DARE YOU WRITE THIS SONG SHAKING CRYING THROWING UP RN […] THIS IS A PERSONAL ATTACK PLEASE UNWRITE THIS SONG," "they [boygenius] can't keep getting away with this," or "they [boygenius] are so evil" are ways for TikTok users to convey the intense emotions the music evokes within them and the connection they feel to it/to the artist. While they are not truly angry at the artists, this form of ironic outrage communicates their ability to relate to the music/lyric, which in turn creates a sense of connection with the artist and other listeners, and simultaneously affirms their identity as a fan.

While it is difficult to know a creator's intention behind a post just from the text, the hyperboles in these messages of outrage can be interpreted as a conscious adoption of common fandom practices that at times function in an almost self-deprecating way, conveying a certain knowledge of the intensity of one's emotions and how those may be read as the exaggerated, overblown reactions commonly ridiculed in depictions of screaming fangirls. The use of "SHAKING CRYING THROWING UP," a variation of the phrase "screaming, crying, throwing up" commonly used within stan culture to express excitement (Know Your Meme, 2023b), particularly conveys familiarity with fandom cultures and vernaculars. While the emotions expressed are likely genuine, using exaggerated outrage to express them also draws attention to the hyperbole itself and to the intensity of fandom practices in which emotions are always performative. The different elements making up self-expression on TikTok can be considered

performative following the sense of the term outlined in J. L. Austin's speech-act theory which theorizes "performative" as indicating that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (1975). Building on Austin's notion, Judith Butler posits gender identity as performative in that it is not a preexisting essence but is produced through its enactments which are shaped by the "regulatory practices of gender coherence" (Butler, 1990, p. 34). Performativity thus reiterates a norm through the imitation and repetition of acts, attributes, gestures, speech-acts etc. that in turn establish the norm as a coherent identity category. Therefore, similar to Butler's argument that it is the enactment and repetition of gender that constructs it, within online fandom practices, it is the enactment and repetition of emotions that constructs them. On TikTok specifically, the platform's affordance of replicability thus facilitates the performance of emotions where their expression is always filtered through an awareness of their audience. By engaging these specific fandom practices, using the vernacular of fandom, creators express their emotions in a register they know will be understood by other fans within this specific context. In this way, emotions within fandom spaces are created through their enactment and exist in a collective context. Although ostensibly functioning as self-expressions, posting one's emotional reaction to the music's release is a way of declaring one's fandom to others, while asking for one's emotions and interests to be valued. As Ewens writes, "Emotions declare: I was there, at this time, at this place, for this artist and I was involved. For that to be witnessed, it elevates all you've felt" (2020, p. 19). Emotional reaction videos thus act as a way of 'proving' one's fandom, of constructing one's identity as a fan which is legitimized by the intensity of emotions expressed as witnesses by others.

These expressions of intense emotions thus contribute to the construction of a coherent sad girl music fan identity. As Zulli & Zulli argue in their conceptualization of imitation publics, it is "through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication" (2022, p. 1882) that people on TikTok in particular are able to connect and feel a sense of community. Far from devaluing the genuineness/earnestness of emotions, within fandom spaces, the repetition of specific kinds of posts, phrases, and vernaculars as expressions of emotions allow for their legibility and exchange. Viewing these kinds of expressions in amalgamation thus creates a connection among the TikTok creators, between the fans who engage in this type of fandom practice together. By taking part in the repetition of these expressions, folks on TikTok both construct their own identity as legible to others, allowing them to feel connected to fandom cultures, and reiterate and consequently legitimize the broader conception of what it means to be a sad girl music fan.

Taken collectively, pronouncements of outrage at the artists thus appear less focused on parasocial relationships between individual fans and the artists, but rather as a way for fans to share their reactions and engage in a communal experience of the music. Even while listening to the music on their own in physically separate places, TikTok provides fans with a way to come together in a shared experience of relating to music that allows them to connect with strangers. As Ewens writes, "to be a fan is to scream alone together" (2020, p. 6). While fandom has always been a place of uniting with strangers and friends through shared interests, how these connections take place are shaped by the platform context they exist in. TikTok provides a new platform that is particularly conducive to assembling fan cultures due to its algorithmic organization that is largely arranged around "niche taste communities" and "micro individuality" (Anselmo, 2018, p. 90) and these structures facilitate the formation of communities around specific artists, topics, or identities. At the same time, reaction videos highlight how being a fan becomes part of identity constructions. Considering Butler's notion of identity performativity places repetition as central to identity, which is always a doing, TikTok serves as particularly generative ground for analysing how identity is constructed through performance due to its focus on repetition and imitation (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

sad GIRL music: "I'm just a girl"?

The term 'girl' gets taken up in sad girl music TikToks in various ways that demonstrate the tensions between reinforcing and disrupting normative constructions of gender while largely using the term as an expression of community. On the one hand, some TikToks use the expression "I'm just a girl," often in relation to how the music is impacting their mood: "im just a girl boygenius why are you doing this to me." Engaging in the performance of emotions discussed above, in this context, the reference to being 'just a girl' portrays girlhood as weak and vulnerable as it implies the creator is not able to cope with the music due to being "just a girl." Although this expression builds on social media vernacular practices where it is commonly meant in a humorous and ironic way, it is important to note how it may contribute to self-infantilization that essentializes notions of girlhood. Another TikTok by a creator who uses he/him pronouns is set to a popular sound proclaiming, "I'm big with teens, girls, lesbians, the mentally ill, the very sad," and shows him presenting his vinyl records which include albums by artists such as Olivia Rodrigo, Harry Styles, and Phoebe Bridgers one by one along with the sound fitting each to a descriptor (with Phoebe Bridgers aligned with the "lesbians" sound bite), overlaid by the text "I <3 my basic white

girl music" (cf. Figure 4-3). Here, due to the negative connotation of the word "basic" (Urban Dictionary, n.d.-a), describing the music as "basic white girl music" disparages it and its listeners, even though the user also expresses his enjoyment of it. Although pronouns are not necessarily an indicator of gender identity, a male-presenting creator who uses he/him pronouns using the descriptor "basic white girl," even in a humorous way, can particularly carry a negative connotation of girlhood, reinforcing gender stereotypes, as well as limiting sad girl music to white listeners. Stereotypes are further reiterated in the alignment of specific albums with the identity descriptors of the sound. However, considering how young boys and men who exhibit interest in things traditionally regarded as feminine are often faced with homophobia steeped in misogyny, this proclamation and self-identification with things that are commonly belittled as girly also disrupts that misogyny by claiming femininity and girlhood as positive. This reflects the recent usage of the term 'girl' on social media where it is not necessarily always a gendered term. As Solis (2023) writes, "a girl could be anyone who doesn't fall into the gendered idea of the word or even anyone on the internet." Instead of a specific conception of gender, the term thus expresses a sense of shared experience and "works to establish an in-group and relish a particular kind of bond" (Solis, 2023). In the case of this TikTok, the use of the term girl in association with the music thus contributes to the construction of a shared collective identity.

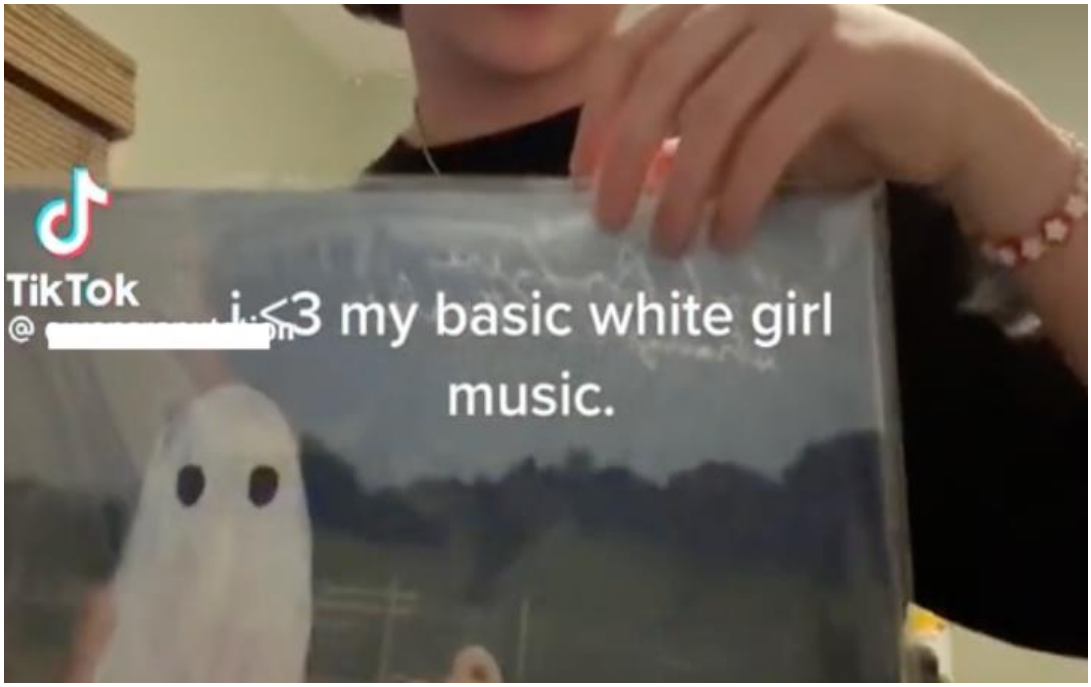

Figure 4-3: "I <3 my basic white girl music" TikTok

A similar effect can be seen in a TikTok where the creator lists "artist that I think should just be for the girls, girls only." Starting with "the obvious ones" like boygenius and Ethel Cain, she then goes on to mention Bruce Springsteen, stating that it "may be confusing to a couple of you but no one understands Bruce Springsteen's music more than women." Considering how Bruce Springsteen has long been regarded as the epitome of American working-class masculinity despite his resistance to conservative conceptions of masculinity (Cruz, 2004; Katzenberg, 2007), positing him as "for the girls" breaks with normative conceptions of gender and expands the conception of what is considered 'girly.' The TikTok's humorous take on "girl music" more broadly questions the categorization of music along gender lines. At the same time, it again creates a sense of community demarcated by the "for the girls" categorization that brings together those who relate to that description.

These examples of how girlhood features in sad girl music TikToks thus simultaneously construct sad girl music in relation to gender, facilitating feelings of belonging, while also highlighting the tensions in engagements with gender. They show how girlhood trends can on one level reinforce normative conceptions of gender while also being critical of these and reclaiming expansive views of girlhood in the face of misogyny.

sad girl MUSIC: "Lavender Oat Milk Latte People"

Being the third word in the term, 'music' heavily features in collective sad girl music fan identity, though less directly so than emotions and gender. Instead, music is the underlying structure that the other aspects of identity construction are tied to. Although appearing mostly in the background in TikToks, it is through the music's content and artists' identities and expressions that specific objects, affects, and markers come to be regarded as central to the conception of a collective sad girl music fan identity. For example, the association of queerness with sad girl music and boygenius fandom in particular can be traced back to the band members' openness about their queerness. One TikTok reacting to music contains the text "we are not doing well. wild day for lavender oat milk latte people" (cf. Figure 4-4). While this description may seem confusing, most people engaging with sad girl music on TikTok would likely be able to understand and maybe relate to it. Within certain internet cultures, drinking lavender lattes, particularly with oat milk, signifies queerness as it is seen to be a drink largely ordered by LGBTQ+ people (Urban Dictionary, 2021). Though difficult to trace the exact origins of this particular term on the internet, purple, violet, and lavender have long been symbols for the LGBTQ+ community; from a line by

Figure 4-4: "Lavender Oat Milk Latte People"

Sappho, to Oscar Wilde, to the lavender scare of the McCarthy era, to the lavender menace of the second-wave feminist movement (Hastings, 2020). Although it is unclear whether the creator of this TikTok is consciously referencing this history, using the term nonetheless reflects an association between listening to boygenius' music and being queer. It does so through shared identity markers that are relatable to others on TikTok. Applying Kanai's lens of relatability, consuming lavender oat milk lattes is at once a very general, but also very specific experience ostensibly shared between boygenius fans on TikTok. The mention of a certain object may thus provide identification to others who relate to being fan of boygenius and being queer due to its repeated mention, which establishes it as part of sad girl music fan identity. However, this example also opens the question of whether and in what ways the focus on specific objects as markers of identity, even when within collective self-definitions, may also become limiting and stereotyped to the extent of reinforcing a normative view of queer youth. While race does not directly feature in the collective identity constructions in my dataset, one TikTok shows a Black woman looking around at a boygenius concert with text stating: "what it's like to be one of 6 people of colour at a boygenius show." Even though it may not be the aim of the creators co-constructing the sad girl music fan identity to cast it as largely white, the lack of explicit representation, or references like "basic white girl music" mentioned above, can nonetheless contribute to a limited notion of what it means to be a sad girl music fan. Hence, it is important to consider how collective identity constructions can both create a sense of community for those who feel represented, while also not being particularly welcoming, to the point of becoming exclusionary.

These limitations and exclusions are further reinforced when collective identity constructions are shaped and/or commercialized by outside actors. Thinking back to the Spotify-generated "sad girl starter pack" playlist discussed in the previous chapter, its characterization of the sad girl music listener overlaps with the collective identity constructions present in my TikTok dataset. These overlaps are particularly apparent regarding fashion and external appearances. One of the elements notedly visible in the playlist's cover image is a pair of boots that, although not explicitly branded, appear to be in the style of Dr. Martens, a brand that repeatedly appears in sad girl music TikToks. One TikTok captioned "pov [Point of View]: you are at a boygenius concert," incorporates a TikTok sound repeating the words "Nice Docs!" to show the plethora of Dr. Martens boots worn by people at the concert. Drawing on the familiar practice of using humour to poke fun at stereotypes (Jamet-Lange & Duguay, 2024, p. 9), TikToks like this simultaneously recognize the stereotype but also engage in its continued visibility. Since it is impossible to definitively place the origin of this stereotypical association between queer sad girl music listeners and Dr. Martens, it is not clear to what extent these kinds of TikToks may influence or be influenced by the Spotify playlist's representation of sad girl music fans, but that also is not of particular relevance here. What this focus on a specific brand as part of identity construction reveals is the centrality of consumption to fandom identity (Grossberg, 1992), and the branding of authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In her book *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012), Banet-Weiser explores how cultural spaces thought of as authentic, such as the self, are increasingly structured around the processes of branding where branding is understood as building an "affective, authentic relationship with a consumer" (p. 8). In this context, commodities take on cultural value and, much more than an object, the choice of a certain brand over another symbolizes a range of associations, contributing to an individual's identity construction. The choice of sad girl music fans to mention Dr. Martens boots or lavender oat milk lattes is thus tied to a broad range of cultural meanings and histories (Zygan, 2021) that become markers of identity.

However, when identity constructions revolve increasingly around consumer goods, they may become limiting and prescriptive. Commodification and branding of identity reifies a specific conception of identity. As Banet-Weiser writes, when identities are commodified, they "become hegemonically constructed things rather than relational, intersectional qualities that are constantly subject to reinvention" (2012, p. 36). While I do not mean to go as far as saying that any mention of commodities in sad girl music TikToks can only ever be limiting, since users draw value from

them, the use of specific objects and brands to construct a collective sad girl music fan identity has to be considered carefully. This is even more the case when that construction is done by brands or companies who aim to attract customers for their products, as with Spotify's "sad girl starter pack" playlist, and not by people engaging in self-definitions and co-construction of identity. Considering the similarities between Spotify's conception of sad girl music and the identity constructions in the TikToks, it is important to reflect on the ways in which collective identity constructions that are meant to create a sense of community and relatability between fans are already shaped by corporations and may run the risk of becoming co-opted.

Queer Life Narratives: Navigating Queer Identities Alongside Music

While the previous TikTok examples already address the centrality of queerness to sad girl music identity constructions, they most clearly illustrate the formation of publics and constructions of a collective sad girl music fan identity. Though related to and enmeshed in these collective identity constructions, the TikToks I will turn to now more specifically demonstrate how individuals navigate and construct their identities alongside music. Queer artists and their music provide important representation and can contribute to queer youths' envisioning of queer life narratives – as Driver writes, "music unfolds queer possibilities" (Driver, 2007, p. 216). Thinking back to the TikTok that opened this chapter ("what your favourite lucy dacus album says about you"), within identity constructions in fandom spaces, music is at once something that can be joked about as equating queerness, while also having the potential for empowerment and providing opportunities for a deeper understanding of one's own identity (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). In this context, identifying and engaging with music that deals with a variety of topics, from disillusionment with one's religious upbringing to queer awakenings, can be a way to address one's own experiences and visualize a queer future for oneself.

"im a lesb-oygenius fan": Lesbian Visibility in Sad Girl Music TikToks

All three members of boygenius identify as queer and/or lesbian, and their music and public expressions regularly explicitly address queerness. Meanwhile, Mitski has never concretely defined her sexuality but has mentioned attraction to all genders and many of her songs have been interpreted as queer by fans. As such, the predominance of queer women and lesbian identities within the queer identity expressions that appear in my sad girl music TikTok dataset may not be particularly surprising, but it is nonetheless noteworthy. Examining the different sexual identity

terms and markers included in TikToks through captions, text on screen, or hashtags, the term "lesbian" appeared the most often (42 times), followed by "queer" (33), "gay" (24), "wlw" [women loving women] (18), "lgbtq" (13), "sapphic" (3), and "bisexual" (1). While this is not representative of the entirety of the content as it does not include TikToks that discuss or represent queerness in non-textual ways, it indicates the centrality of lesbian identity constructions to sad

Figure 4-5: "im a lesb-oygenius fan" slideshow TikTok

girl music TikToks.

In the TikTok content, lesbian identity is often humorously constructed in specific relation to sad girl music. Set to the boygenius song "Not Strong Enough", one 2-picture slideshow TikTok strategically uses the platform's slideshow feature to create this association between being a lesbian and a boygenius fan (cf. Figure 4-5). The first picture that users scrolling through their FYP will come across depicts the lesbian flag and reads "im a lesb," denoting a specific identity statement, but when one then scrolls to the second image, instead of completing the word "lesbian" the text builds on the last letter 'b' of the first image and completes as "oygenius fan" over a picture of the band. This TikTok thus quite literally fuses lesbian identity and boygenius fandom, making them textually inseparable. Reminiscent of identificatory phrases like "friend of Dorothy," "k. d. lang fan," or the more recent "do you listen to girl in red?," boygenius fandom can similarly act as lesbian code for people on TikTok and draws explicit attention to lesbian identities. Considering the ways in which lesbian identities have long been invisibilized (Jagose, 1994, 2002; Nešović, 2021), the focus on queer and particularly lesbian identities and desire within sad girl music fandom practices on TikTok is significant as it disrupts lesbian invisibility and simultaneously reshapes familiar fandom practices that are commonly heteronormative and male-centered.

One TikTok in my dataset explicitly addresses lesbian (in-)visibility (cf. Figure 4-6). Set to a Mitski song and featuring the text "me at the end of lesbian visibility week" on the screen, it shows a lesbian in her apartment 'disappearing' with only her glasses (held up by a piece of string) remaining and going about daily tasks. Captioned "see y'all next year" and hashtagged #lesbianvisibilityweek, the TikTok references Lesbian Visibility Week, which is celebrated at the end of April to increase lesbian visibility and raise awareness of lesbian issues. By showing the creator becoming 'invisible' after the end of lesbian visibility week, the TikTok humorously draws attention to the ongoing importance of lesbian representation.

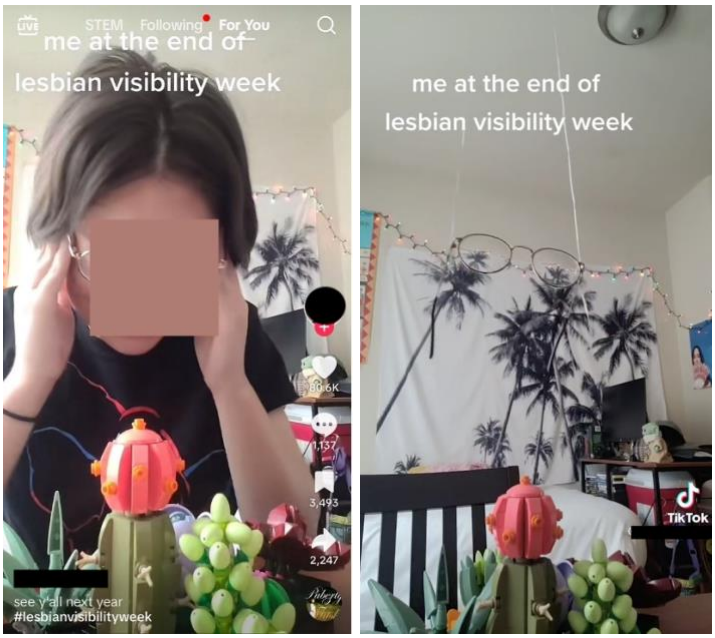

Figure 4-6: "me at the end of lesbian visibility week" TikTok

While representation and visibility on TikTok and social media more broadly are shaped by the platform's sociotechnical arrangements that can at times be limiting and exploitative (Nešović, 2021), it also allows for discussions around lesbian identity to take place. The so-called "Lesbian Masterdoc" (Luz, 2018), a 30-page document originally distributed and discussed on tumblr, has been particularly central to identity-explorations. Drawing upon Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) in addition to personal experiences, the document gained popularity on TikTok in 2020 as a resource for navigating lesbian potentiality that helped users explore their sexuality (Connell et al., 2024; Santiago Cortés, 2022). For one creator in my dataset, the lesbian masterdoc is directly tied to coming out as a lesbian. Showing the creator giving a thumbs-up to the camera, the video states "I fear, I was right not to read the masterdoc" on screen alongside the caption, "new revelation, sorry boys." While sad girl music is

not mentioned explicitly, the TikTok is set to a boygenius song, which likely caused its appearance in my dataset and may expose other people seeing boygenius content on their FYP to the lesbian masterdoc and consequently the concept of compulsory heterosexuality. The focus on lesbian and queer identities in the TikToks thus reflects the explorations of queerness present in the music, which may provide fans with an entry point to learning about these identities.

"Me when the record came out": Music & Queer Life Narratives

Fandom's potential to meaningfully contribute to identity construction and meaning-making is further reflected in a boygenius fandom-specific TikTok trend in which creators relate their individual development over five years to the release of boygenius' music. Using TikTok's slideshow feature and set to a song by the band, these posts consist of two or three images of the creator where the first one depicts them in 2018 with a variation of the text "me when the boygenius ep came out," and a second photo of the creator in March 2023 with a variation of the text "me when the record came out." Some posts further contain a third image from October 2023 when boygenius released their EP *the rest*. By contrasting images of themselves at these different times, the creators draw attention to changes in their personal expression and style (e.g., hair styles, tattoos, or clothing choices) that become 'queerer' over time. This is exemplified in one such TikTok that depicts the creator's hair going from a long, traditionally feminine style to a shorter shag/mullet cut that is sometimes associated with queerness, contributing to an overarchingly more masc/androgynous gender expression. At the same time, the post's caption makes explicit reference to queerness. Stating, "I had to include 2018 straight™ annika," the creator thus clarifies their intention of representing their coming into queerness alongside boygenius' music. Another TikTok using this trend and hashtagged #transmasc portrays the creator's transition process with a caption reading, "Lots of things changed between these two photos, but im still doing the armpit pose tho. Proud of all the growth 💪" (cf. Figure 4-7). In this way, the creator celebrates their transition and personal growth while maintaining that other aspects of their identity have remained the same. While this TikTok trend could easily veer into identity constructions that reiterate specific ideas of what queerness looks like by replicating "glow-up" narratives that generally depict individuals becoming more conventionally attractive over time (Pitcher, 2021), the variety of identities represented, some of which show more non-normative gender expressions, keeps the trend from becoming prescriptive.

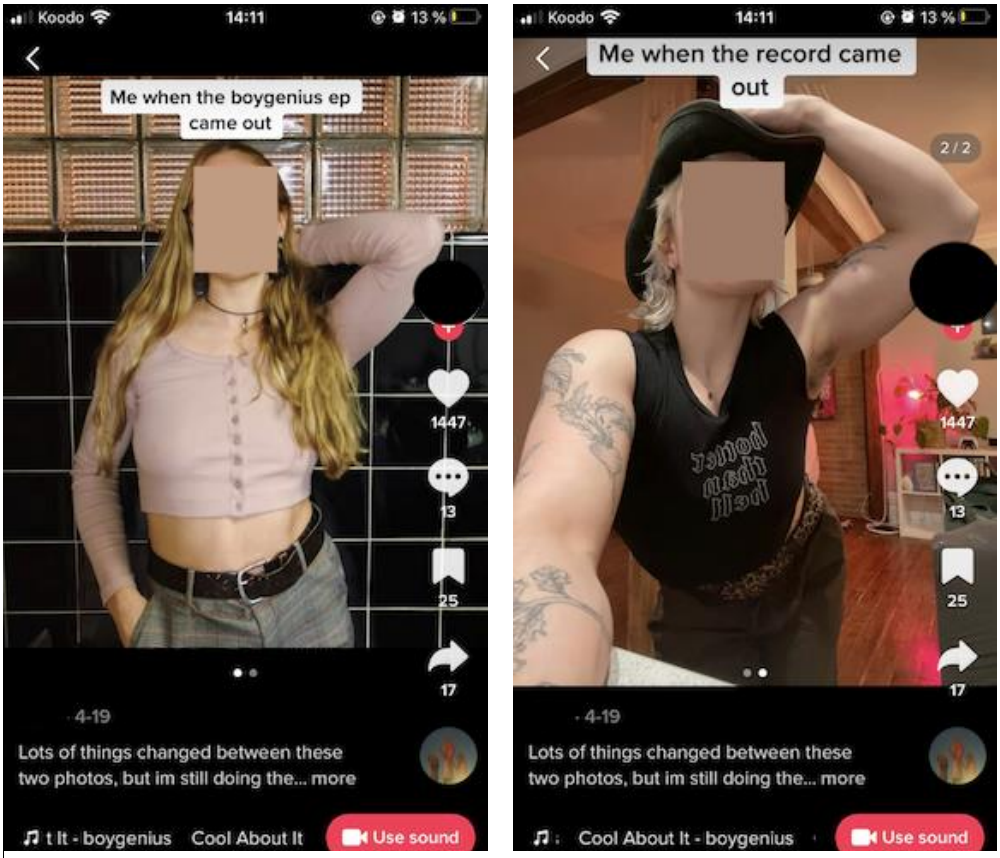

Figure 4-7: "me when…" example

The two examples highlight how this trend allows boygenius fans to express and embrace their queerness, while also illustrating the ways in which engaging with music and in fandom can be a transformative experience that supports identity construction. Between k. d. lang (Grossberg, 1992), Tegan and Sara (Driver, 2007), or Hayley Kiyoko (Freeman, 2020) and girl in red (Curry, 2022) as more recent examples, queer music fandom practices have long served as explorations and expressions of queer identity and sexuality, particularly for queer youth. As Wasserbauer (2021) writes in her study of queer youths' musical coming of age narratives, "music is a valuable tool in helping us negotiate and come to terms with our sexual and gender identities, and it strengthens our sense of self during queer coming of age, as we come to discover our own voice" (p. 285). This role of music in explorations of sexuality and coming out experiences is also visible in sad girl music TikToks that express engagement in fandom as queer awakening. One TikTok shows a young woman sitting in her car looking around confusedly with text on screen stating, "pov [point of view]: straight girl with powerful & confusing feelings toward Julien Baker after seeing boygenius live," while the caption reads, "Boygenius in Toronto was truly life altering." Although still referring to herself as a "straight girl," the creator implies that seeing boygenius

perform has made her question her sexuality and her attraction to women. This reflects how "discovering queer musicians is often interwoven into a process of realizing and naming sexual attractions" (Driver, 2007, p. 221). By having access to a band like boygenius, comprised entirely of queer women who are open about their sexuality, young queer people can find "queer resonance in embodied styles, gestures, words, and rhythms" which further allows them to "develop responses through which to affirm and come into queer subjectivities" (Driver, 2007, p. 216). While this TikTok is reminiscent of the coming out narratives that have long dominated mainstream media depictions of queerness (Francis, 2021; Waggoner, 2018), it is only one of few to do so in my dataset, showing how user-created expressions of sexuality allow for more flexibility and variety. In press interviews, the members of boygenius have discussed their own struggles with "growing up as queer women and fans of music that was largely made by misogynistic bros" (McMenamim, 2023), which have in turn informed their desire to, through their music, provide a space for queer people to exist. In one TikTok filmed at a more intimate concert and Q&A with boygenius, Julien Baker, sitting on stage next to Lucy Dacus who is holding a huge lesbian flag in her hands, says "I wish I could have told 12-year-old me scared to come out, someday people are going to fling lesbian flags at you. Even though the band's music oftentimes deals with serious themes and negative emotions, on stage, they aim to embody queer joy (McMenamim, 2023), not just for their audience, but also for their younger selves. In this context, the TikToks portray how boygenius' music and this focus on queer joy is received by young queer audiences. They show how open expressions of queerness can facilitate others to openly express their queerness and the importance that music has to identity constructions and coming into queerness.

Queering Fandom Practices: Identity with and against Mainstream

Although some TikToks in the previous sections already take up common fandom practices in queer ways, these forms of engagements are largely focused on the self and its relation to music, and on collective identity constructions and relations to other fans. In the TikToks I turn to now, identity is more specifically constructed in relation to mainstream and broader public discourses, memes, and practices. By engaging with mainstream fandom practices or TikTok trends, but focusing them on sad girl music and queerness, TikTok users posit themselves as simultaneously alongside and against the mainstream. They disrupt the common narratives associated with

mainstream fandom practices and platform trends by queering them which in turn provides an entry to queer culture and spaces.

Boygenius as Boyband: Fandom as Exploration of Sexuality & Queer Desires

While fandom can often be one of the first outlets for teenage girls to express sexual attraction and desires, mainstream narratives of screaming fangirls are largely focused around their assumed attraction to male stars. With sexuality as an important element of fandom expressions and constructions of identity in sad girl music TikToks, there exist certain parallels to mainstream fandom practices, but these are reshaped by the focus on queerness.

One TikTok posted in October 2023 makes a direct link between fandom practices engaged in by One Direction fans and those the creator is engaging in in anticipation of boygenius's concert at Madison Square Garden in New York City. The video shows a young white woman facing the camera. She has a face mask on, and her hair is pushed back with a headband. The video is overlaid with text stating: "Giving Boygenius at MSG the same energy I did for One Direction. I am showered, shaved, exfoliated, face mask, hair mask, clothes laid out, new glitter eyeshadow purchased, BBL, buccal fat removal etc…". This is set to a popular TikTok sound that mixes a segment from Phoebe Bridgers' song "Motion Sickness" with a sound clip of a conversation taken from the TV adaptation of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*. The sound bite contains the dialogue "You look really well", "I know, it's classic me, came to college and got pretty." These elements together create a TikTok that is highly referential, requiring familiarity with fandom practices, TikTok vernaculars and discourses to make sense of each element. But even without the full context, the TikTok's humorous take on sexuality and fandom practices remains clear.

Listing ever more invasive hygiene and beauty procedures, from showering to elective plastic surgeries (with reference to buccal fat removal which was in the spotlight following rumours about celebrities like Lea Michelle having undergone the surgery (Kircher, 2022)), the creator draws parallels between the practices undertaken as a presumably young teenage girl who got dressed up for a One Direction concert and the preparations of a now young women (presumably in her early 20s) for a boygenius concert. While the implication is that these preparations are to make herself sexually and romantically appealing to members of the band, akin to how one might prepare for a date or sexual encounter, the statement's use of hyperbole indicates a humorous approach to these procedures and draws attention to the pressures of beauty standards.

It simultaneously uses self-deprecating humour to make fun of both her younger and current self, while also expressing appreciation and creating a continuity in her fandom practices.

By connecting fandom to sexuality, the TikTok highlights how fandom practices can be an important factor in teenage girls' first expressions of sexual attraction and desire. Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs note how, in the context of an increasingly sexualized mainstream culture of the 1960s in which teenage girls were nonetheless expected to remain 'pure' and 'good,' participating in Beatlemania and publicly laying claim to sexual feelings was a way "to protest the sexual repressiveness" (Ehrenreich et al., 1992, p. 85). In comparison with the pressures of navigating the tension between having to be attractive and sexual enough to be popular with boys and remaining virtuous and focused on marriage and domesticity, fandom provided an opportunity to "express sexual yearnings that would normally be pressed into the service of popularity or simply repressed. The star could be loved noninstrumentally, for his own sake, and with complete abandon" (Ehrenreich et al., 1992, pp. 96–97). Boyband fandoms have allowed teenage girls to articulate their desires in a way that still feels safer/more anonymous due to the distance to their object of desire and this expression happening in a context where others are doing the same thing.

One Direction provides the most prominent example of this in the social media age. Formed in 2010 on the British singing competition show *The X Factor*, One Direction quickly rose to fame and global commercial success, largely propelled by teenage fans on social media, many of whom declared their attraction to members of the band (Smith, 2012; Tiffany, 2022). Common narratives about the fandom emphasized its intensity, often casting fans' adoration simultaneously as childish infatuation and obsessive sexualization, again reflecting the double standards applied to young women's sexuality. Generally, the focus within boyband and fandom accounts has largely been on heterosexuality, or, occasionally, on men loving men (mlm) ships. Positing boygenius as akin to boy bands like One Direction disrupts these understandings of the heterosexual fangirl. This comparison queers understandings of fangirl practices and may even retroactively provide a different lens through which to view One Direction fandom, highlighting the queerness that was always present. Instead of the common narrative of heterosexual teenage girls having a parasocial crush on (one of) the conventionally attractive members of One Direction, this portrays young queer women attracted to the queer female members of boygenius. Considering how often queer women are either invisibilized or hypersexualized for the male gaze, having access to representation of queer women on their own terms in the members of boygenius presents young

queer fans with an alternative to the heteronormative depictions they are commonly faced with. While Beatlemania of the 1960s showed how, for girls, "fandom offered a way not only to sublimate romantic and sexual yearnings but to carve out subversive versions of heterosexuality" (Ehrenreich et al., 1992, p. 100), claiming the boy band for lesbians and queer women illuminates both the importance of explicitly queer fandom spaces, as well as the queer and lesbian possibilities that have always existed within boy band fandom spaces.

In boy band contexts, queer women's and girls' attraction is for the most part not directed at the male musicians their fandom centres around, but at each other and at desire itself (McCann & Southerton, 2019, p. 58). Although boygenius also facilitates desire between its fans, within boygenius fandom, queer women and girls' attraction and desire are commonly also directed at members of the band. This attraction is particularly visible in popular fandom practices such as fan edits or fancams. Referring to fan-made videos arranging clips and pictures of celebrities or characters to music, fan edits are expressions of fandom that allow creators to bring new meanings to the material of their fandom (Cavender, 2022). Fancams serve a similar purpose, but commonly focus on one celebrity or character and are thus often used within boy band fandom to denote one's "favourite." My dataset featured multiple fan edits and fancams, many of which focused

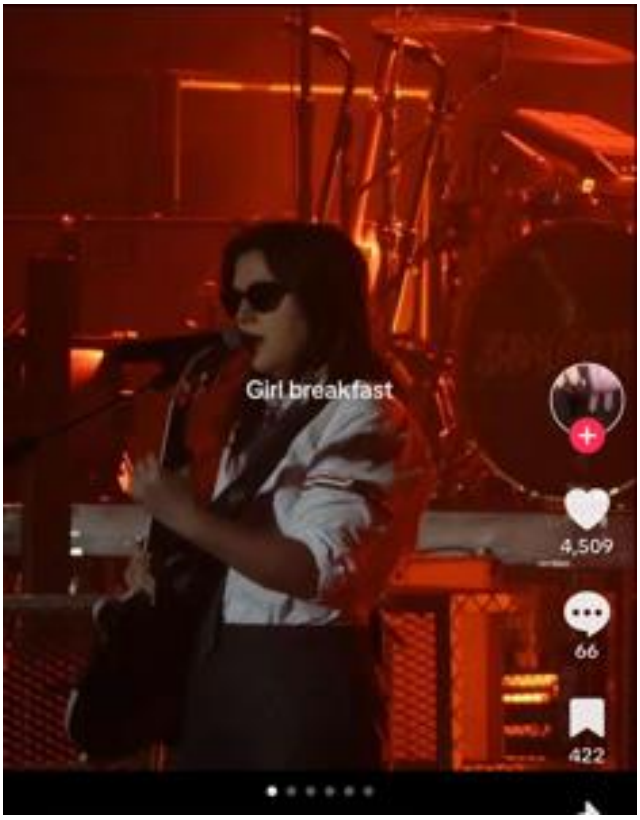

Figure 4-8: Lucy Dacus Fancam

specifically on one of the three members of boygenius to express the creators' attraction toward them. One such fancam combines images of Lucy Dacus with references to the "girl dinner" trend by associating each image with texts going from "girl breakfast" to "girl midnight snack" (cf. Figure 4-8). Invoking girl dinner this context becomes sexual through the arrangement of text, sound, and images which denote the creator's attraction to Lucy Dacus. Further, the use of meals and "eating" as a stand in for desire may also implicitly make reference to cunnilingus, particularly considering Billie Eilish's subsequent use of "I could eat that girl for lunch" as an expression of desire for cunnilingus in her song "Lunch" (Eilish, 2024). Fancams like this one thus explicitly centre queer desires in ways that queer commonly heterosexual/male-focused fandom practices.

This queer disruption of fandom practices is further amplified by the artists' open expressions of queerness and sexuality. While making use of fandom practices popularized in largely heterosexual contexts, the dynamics within boygenius fandom also differ from these contexts. While boybands like One Direction often needed to keep a 'cleaner' look that was not so overtly sexual as to be scandalous considering the average age of their teenage fans, and experienced pressures from management to remain single such as to more fully enable teenage girls' crushes and fantasies, boygenius (quite literally) embraces queer female sexuality more explicitly. By kissing each other on stage or going topless during concerts, the band reclaims agency over their sexuality and their sexualized image. As Driver writes, "artists connect with queer girl audiences through erotically charged performances focusing young females' gazes on unconventionally sexy bodies and pleasures" (2007, p. 222). While female musicians are often sexualized and objectified by the media, doing so on their own terms on stage and in their music videos (instead of – for example – in magazine photoshoots where the decision power may not only lie with them) allows boygenius to assert agency over their sexual expressions and further contributes to queer fandom practices.

Within mainstream media, the sexualization and objectification of women often renders them without agency. In his seminal work on the female nude in western art, John Berger argues that "men act and women appear" (1972, p. 47). Men are thus cast as the surveyor while women are not only surveyed by men but also "watch themselves being looked at" (Berger, 1972, p. 47). This dynamic is also encapsulated in Laura Mulvey's conception of the male gaze in film (1975). Mulvey argues that, in mainstream film, the gaze of the spectator is aligned with that of the male characters, while women are cast solely through said gaze and appear as sexual objects. In this

way, the camera reinforces the patriarchal order which casts men as active and women as passive. In contrast, conceptions of the female gaze have explored the possibilities of how this dynamic is disrupted when agency lies with women, when the aligned viewpoints of the camera, the characters, and the spectator are female (Gamman & Marshment, 1988). With Mulvey's concept of the male gaze largely ignoring queerness, further scholars have considered the potential of lesbian spectatorship (De Lauretis, 1994; Hollinger, 1998; Homans et al., 1991). Hollinger (1998) argues that "the lesbian look challenges the exclusive male prerogative to control the filmic gaze and reconfigures this gaze so that it reflects a new female relation to desire" (p. 13). Considering the sexual expressions of boygenius in relation to these conceptualizations of the gaze, fancams capturing the band's assertion of agency over their sexual image which is aimed at a specifically queer female audience can thus be regarded as examples of a queer female/lesbian look. Different from the male gaze, the lesbian look in Hollinger's model "requires exchange," as it "looks for a returning look, not just a receiving look" (Hollinger, 1998, p. 12). Boygenius' expressions of sexuality illustrate this two-directionality as it stands in conversation with fans' gazes.

Queering of Mainstream TikTok Trends

In addition to creating their own themes, trends, and vernaculars, sad girl music TikToks frequently appropriate bigger mainstream TikTok trends in ways that specifically relate them back to the music and/or to queerness. In this way, engagements with sad girl music on TikTok are shaped by wider platform practices and trends but can in turn also shape the discourses associated with these practices. By jumping on a viral TikTok trend/meme, they make use of the platform's features and affordances in order to carve out space for queerness.

At the time I conducted my data collection, a picture of Kevin James with his hands in his pocket, smirking at the camera in a slightly mischievous way, taken in 1998 on the set of *The King of Queens,* went viral on the social internet (Know Your Meme, 2023a). Originating on X (cf. Figure 4-9), the first known use was in a Tweet that captioned it "me after 1 double rum and diet," reflecting the common use with captions fitting the facial expression to convey a certain cheekiness (Know Your Meme, 2023a). From X, the image quickly jumped between platforms and started making the rounds on TikTok and Instagram. In this move from one platform to the other, with changes in functions, affordances, and platform vernaculars, the use of the image slightly shifted. While continuing to engage with the image's expression of cringe and mischievousness, creators on TikTok often embedded it through the slideshow function that allows users to post TikToks

consisting of multiple still images instead of videos. Within my collection of sad girl music TikToks, the image was used in five two-image slideshows where the first image is a stock photo of young people at a party looking at the camera with a disgusted expression, overlaid with the text "Everyone at the party wondering who tf [the fuck] put this song on," while the second slide uses the viral Kevin James image with the text "me standing next to the speaker" (cf. Figure 4-10). Set to a boygenius song, many of these posts edit the second image to include visuals of boygenius' album covers and/or merch, pride flags, and/or tears on Kevin James' face. In this way, they take part in a larger viral trend that allows for the content to reach wider audiences, demonstrating creators are plugged into broader internet discourses while still focusing on their specific fandom practices and interests.

Considering the common association of boygenius and their fans with queerness, appropriation of viral TikTok trends or memes for sad girl music TikToks allows creators to queer

Figure 4-9: Original Kevin James Smirking Meme

Figure 4-10: Kevin James meme - boygenius version

these trends. While the inclusion of pride flags in the sad girl music versions of the Kevin James meme already adds a layer of queerness to a mainstream trend, this is particularly visible in the example of a trend that has creators filming themselves looking around expectantly in a public space under the text "when the dating apps aren't working so it's time to look confused in [insert public space/store]." Many early iterations of this meme largely built on heteronormative gender roles by focusing on spaces that are commonly regarded as male- or female-dominated, such as Home Depot or Sephora, and thus lent themselves as spaces for heterosexual dating encounters (Smoot, 2023). Even though the trend is meant to be humorous, the notion that women are confused at Home Depot and need a man to help them while men are confused at Sephora and need a woman to help them plays into gender stereotypes and may contribute to reinforcing essentialist conceptions of the gender binary. In opposition to that, examples of the trend in my dataset provide a queer spin on it. One TikTok declaring, "Dating apps arent working so time to look confused at the MUNA/Boygenius concert" shows a white woman looking around at a concert. With the caption stating "where tf [the fuck] is my wife 🤷‍♀️??" and hashtags including #wlw #lgbtq #dating, this TikTok clearly focuses on queer dating. While the depiction of a boygenius/MUNA concert as an appropriate space for queer women to find a date – recalling other TikToks that described boygenius fans as 90% single and queer – may be regarded as another form of stereotyping, it also reflects the more limited options of spaces in which queer people can safely date and express their sexuality. Therefore, the appropriation of heteronormative memes in a queer context is not only a joke about frustration with dating apps, but once again reflects how association with musicians/celebrities can serve as an identifier of queerness and how concerts can, for some folks, be the first time they are in a place fully surrounded by other queer people (Driver, 2007, p. 228).

Obsessive Fan Behaviour and Issues in Fandom Discourses

When fans tie too much of their identity to fandom, this can at times result in obsessive and harmful behaviour. While debates around fame and fan entitlement are particularly visible at the moment of writing (September 2024), propelled by Chappell Roan's statements about "predatory behaviour (disguised as 'superfan' behaviour)" (Roan [@chappellroan], 2024), discussions around fandom and the ways in which social media are impacting artist-fan relationships are not new, with boygenius having discussed toxic fan behaviours, and a few TikToks in my dataset making reference to problems within fandom spaces.

The issues referenced in the TikToks aren't always explained in detail, but they provide a glimpse at the ways in which social media discourses can become focused on artists' personal lives. One example features the text, "Hi as a lesbian woman (credentials) I would like to publicly state that we should ban all boygenius discourse and just enjoy that the boys got back together and are giving us more high quality beautiful amazing meaningful music, created with the power of friendship" (3-27). With the reference to "boygenius discourse" being quite vague, the user highlights how discussions about the band members themselves can overtake the attention on the music itself. In interviews, boygenius have discussed how the intensity of fan's obsession with them, particularly speculations about their personal lives and romantic attachments, affect them (McMenamim, 2023). In response to mention of how "it seems most queer fans have a crush on one or all of them, Lucy [Dacus] admits some of the attention makes her uncomfortable, while Julien [Baker] tries to stay insulated" (McMenamim, 2023). For Phoebe Bridgers, whose 2021 Grammy Nominations and appearance on *Saturday Night Live* during which she smashed a guitar drew particular media attention, the spotlight has been especially troubling. Following her father's death, she experienced harassment from fans and paparazzi, both in person and online (McMenamim, 2023). These statements draw attention to the ways in which social media has changed artist-fan relationships to the point where artists, and particularly female musicians, are expected to be constantly accessible to their fans. Repeating the lyrics, "I can't love you how you want me to," boygenius' song "Bite the Hand" illustrates the band's inability to meet expectations fans place on them (boygenius, 2018a). While they express gratitude for their fans, they also express a sense of fear ("Maybe I'm afraid of you") in response to fans' obsession with them. Interchanging the lines "I'll bite the hand that feeds me" and "Bite the hand that needs me," they acknowledge the interdependence between artist and audience, but state that they nonetheless cannot give the audience everything.

Although intimacy has long been part of relationships between musicians and fans, particularly when the music is imbued with personal aspects that audiences relate to, Nancy Baym's book *Playing to the Crowd* (2018) explores how social media has increased the demands on musicians to actively engage with their fans. Building on Hochschild's concept of emotional labour that posits management of emotional displays as part of job requirements (Hochschild, 2012), Baym argues that the work musicians do in creating and maintaining ongoing relationships with their fans should be regarded as "relational labour" (2018, p. 6). Defined "as the ongoing,

interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work" (p. 19), relational labour is further shaped by platform affordances. Through the constant access provided by social media, the boundaries between artists' personal and professional lives are increasingly blurred. Feeling connected to musicians through the glimpse into their life provided by social media, fans start to expect ever greater "access, intimacy, and affiliation" (Baym, 2018, p. 171).

In this context, the line between adoring fan behaviour that may at times explore sexual desires, as in the examples of fancams, and fan behaviour that is objectifying and obsessive to the point of becoming invasive is an important one. Creating a fancam of an artist and posting it online differs from yelling "Mother" at Mitski during her concert (Falcons2Flynn, 2024), but the former may encourage the latter. One TikTok discusses how fans calling Mitski "mommy" is inappropriate, especially in response to her release of a song that addresses her disillusionment with the life of being a creative person in the context of an industry that fetishizes youth. With the caption stating, "I am begging people to critically engage with her lyrics and body of work," the TikTok calls out these kinds of behaviours and makes a direct appeal to other fans. Even though the term "mother,"—originally derived from the Black and Latino LGBTQ+ ballroom scene (Kesslen, 2023)—, is largely applied as a term of adoration to refer to "a woman who's iconic and constantly serves cunt" (Urban Dictionary, 2022), using it to disrupt a concert of an artist who has consciously removed themselves from the public eye does not have the same effect. Instead, it shows how the fan's identity construction can become too dependent on the relation to the artist, where the urge to have oneself noticed by the artist overtakes consideration of the artists' personhood.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted the centrality of identity to engagements with sad girl music on TikTok. Although music and fandom have long been an important catalyst for identity constructions, TikTok's affordances and features, in particular the sound feature, provide a particularly favourable context for identity (co-)constructions and formation of publics around music fandom. This chapter demonstrates how queer youth utilize TikTok's affordances and features and engage with fandom practices in order to find community through co-constructions of sad girl music fan identity, to explore and express their own identities and queerness, and to subvert and queer mainstream trends and fandom practices. My analysis shows how these co-

constructions of identity happen on multiple different, but interconnected levels that overarchingly serve as explorations and expressions of queer identities.

By participating in the construction of a collective 'sad girl music fan' identity structured around sadness, girlhood and queerness, music and a variety of shared affects, users create relatability that provides them with a sense of belonging, but that may also be limiting. Connected to these collective constructions but focusing more on individual queer life narratives, queer youth on TikTok further relate the music to their own experiences, showing how music can contribute to individual explorations of lesbian and queer identities. At the same time, through the use of often heteronormative fandom practices and platform trends, fans construct their identities both within and against the mainstream, both as part of traditional fandom narratives, and as an alternative to their common heteronormativity. This queering of mainstream practices opens space for queer identity constructions, providing queer youth with an entry to queer culture. Nonetheless, the chapter also notes how obsessive fan behaviour illustrates the possibilities of identity being too closely constructed in relation to artists to the point where it leads to a sense of entitlement to a response from the artist. Overarchingly, this chapter shows how queer youth's engagements with sad girl music on TikTok are largely oriented around identity and community. In this analysis, I have largely focused on TikToks that directly engage with sad girl music in one way or another. In the next chapter, I will focus more specifically on sadness and other affects that feature in the videos, exploring how they relate to broader socio-political contexts.

Chapter 5: "crying on the internet for valid reasons"?: Emotions, Affects, Societal Contexts, and Political Potentials of Sad Girl Music TikToks

While the previous chapter's analysis of the ways in which identity is constructed within sad girl music TikToks already touched on emotions, I now turn to focus specifically on the affects, feelings, and emotions present in both the TikToks and the music itself. I argue that the emotions within both the TikToks and the music the TikToks engage with work on multiple different, though overlapping levels: the individual, the community, the societal, and the political level. First, emotional music functions on an individual level for listeners who relate it to their personal experiences where music can simultaneously function as a trigger and coping mechanism for strong negative emotions. Second, emotions function on a community level where expressions of emotions in relation to music create an intimate public based in a sociality of sadness. Third, emotions function as an articulation of broader socio-political structures and issues where the impasse created by sadness can provide space for reflection on how this socio-political context is impacting queer youth's hopes and anxieties for the future. And fourth, emotions can, at times, function as a starting point for more explicitly political engagements where sad girl music becomes associated with left-wing politics, thus attuning audiences to political thought. By approaching the expressions of emotions present in sad girl music TikToks on these different levels, I show how queer youth's engagements with sadness function as a way of understanding and processing their own emotions and mental health issues in a broader socio-political context. In demonstrating queer youth's continued yearning for a future that they don't quite believe in anymore, my analysis reveals how these engagements with sadness simultaneously allow them to find connections that might provide a way to move past yearning into political action.

Looking at the emotions, feelings, and affects in sad girl music TikToks, the focus is, unsurprisingly, on sadness and negative feelings more broadly that aren't always labeled specifically as sadness. Despite other emotions from rage to hope also being mentioned, the overarching affect within my dataset is one of sadness. Before diving into the analysis of what these emotions and affects do and how they relate to broader societal contexts, I first take a brief look at how emotions are communicated in relation to sad girl music. Within the TikToks, emotions are expressed both through visual elements, mainly facial and bodily expressions such as showing oneself crying, falling down in seeming anguish, or looking at the camera wistfully, and through textual elements, such as use of words like "sad," "I am not doing well," or mentions

of depression or mental illness. One of the main ways in which emotions appear in my TikTok dataset is in response to music. Over 100 TikToks in my dataset relate listening to sad girl music to mood and emotional well-being, while 70 TikToks show people crying. In the previous chapter, I argued that these performances of emotions in reaction videos contribute to constructions of (collective) identity and to the conceptualization of what it means to be a sad girl music fan. In this chapter, I show that reaction videos also more generally illustrate how emotions are expressed through fandom and vernacular practices, and how queer youth on TikTok relate music to their mood and emotional well-being.

Although mentions of mental illness, including specific mentions of medical terms and diagnoses such as depression or anxiety, are present in my dataset, the terminology used is not unifyingly defined. As such, my analysis of how mental illness and sadness appear in TikToks and what these do is dependent on context-specific interpretations and an understanding that the cultural meanings of terms may not always equate their medical definitions. At the same time, while expressions of sadness are often not explicit in their relation to mental illness, they at times convey an underlying "feeling of living with mental ill-health" (Hendry, 2020, p. 8) without the use of medical terms. Because of this "slippage," as Thelandersson (2023, p. 13) terms it, I am hesitant to focus too much on the medical/pathological aspects of how emotions are expressed (except for when explicitly referenced in the TikToks) or to make overarching statements about the mental health of TikTok creators, but am instead more interested in the affects and meanings produced through these references and the ways in which emotions function.

From "deceased" to "healing": Expressing Emotions and Mental Well-Being through Music

In looking at the expression of emotions in the sad girl music TikToks in my dataset, I first focus on how creators engage with emotional music on an individual level. Research has long shown that one of the central reasons for music consumption is that it provides listeners with a variety of affective experiences (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). Music can soothe, anger, depress, energize; it can accompany or regulate moods and emotions. The TikToks in my dataset highlight these effects of music on mood and emotional states, showing how music can trigger negative feelings, and also work as a coping mechanism to deal with negative feelings.

"Cause of Death": Expression of Emotions through Humour and Association with Music

With sad girl music so closely associated with negative emotions, it comes as no surprise that queer youth on TikTok often emphasize the negative impact the music can have on their mood. In two TikToks, the creators joke about how coming across TikToks set to Mitski's "My Love is Mine All Mine" negatively impacts their mood. One shows the creator going from smiling at the camera to being overwhelmed by emotions and falling down crying (cf. Figure 5-1). Overlaid with the text "when im looking for a laugh on my fyp and I get ambushed by this song every 13 scrolls," the TikTok uses humour to convey how the music transforms what is meant to be an uplifting and relaxing experience of social media scrolling into an emotional one overtaken by sadness. At the time this TikTok was posted, Mitski's song was one of the most popular ones on the platform and it was the song's use on the platform that made it her most commercially successful song to date

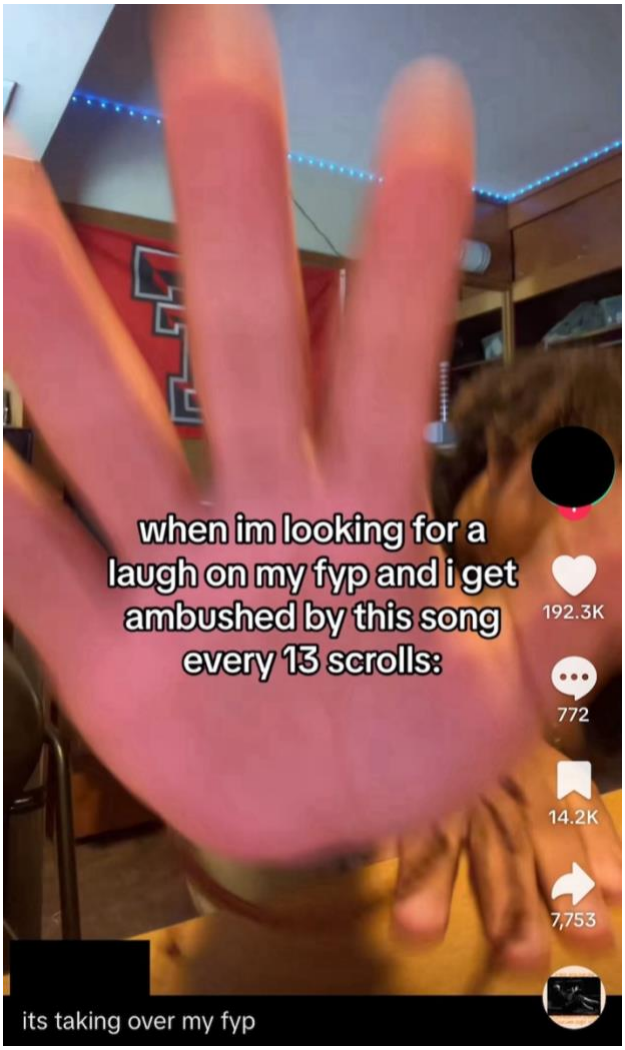

Figure 5-1: Emotional Reaction to Mitski Song Example 1

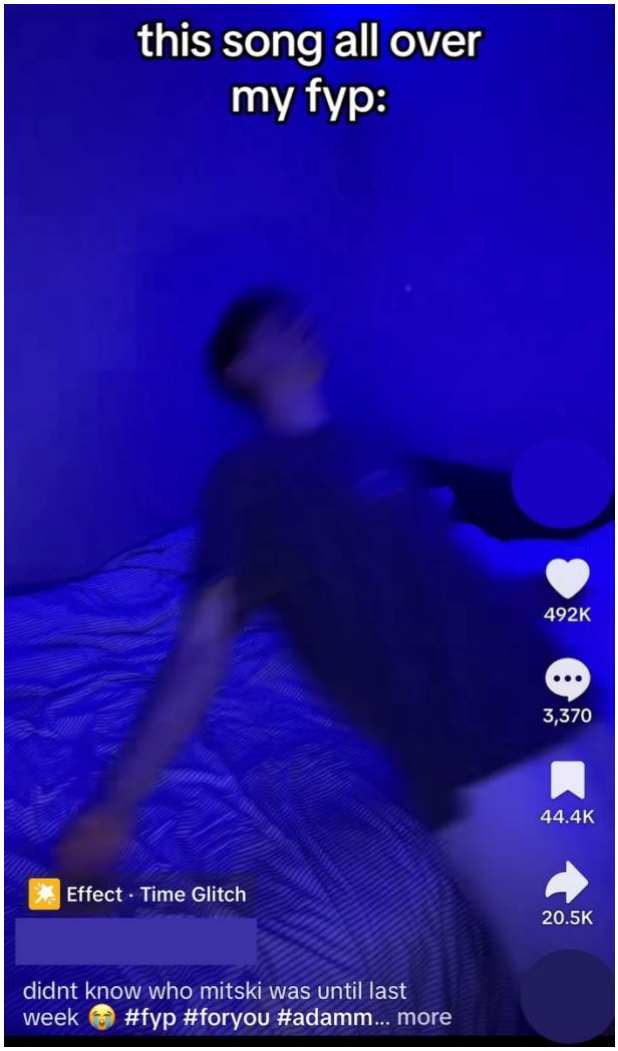

Figure 5-2: Emotional Reaction to Mitski Song Example 2

(Martoccio, 2023). The song's popularity and reception with more mainstream audiences is particularly interesting regarding how the negative affects so present in sad girl culture translate to this audience. The other video that very similarly jokes about the impact of coming across the song while scrolling on TikTok is captioned "didn't know who mitski was until last week 😭" (cf. Figure 5-2), exemplifying how the music can impact somebody's mood, even at first encounter. This demonstrates that music can be an avenue for "expressing and releasing emotions" (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007, p. 99). While the creators in both TikToks are reenacting their emotional reactions in ways that are exaggerated for enhanced effect, this use of hyperbole and the repetition of these performances allows the emotions to become legible.

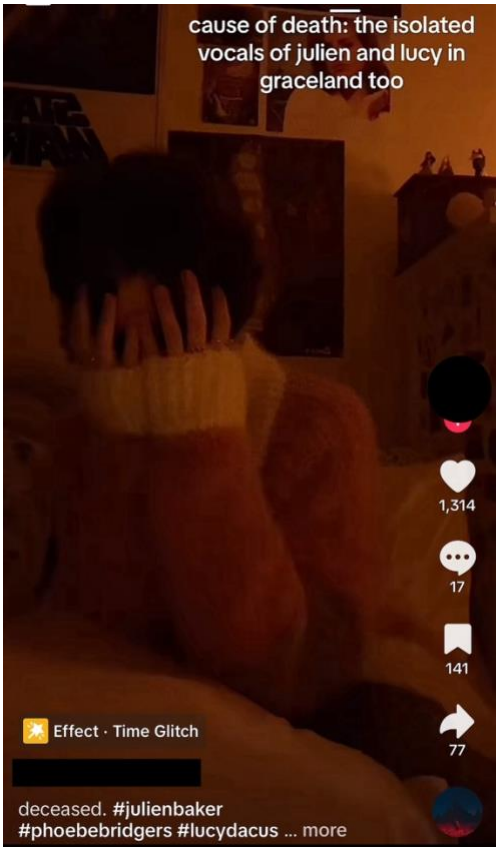

Figure 5-3: music as "cause of death"

Within sad girl music TikToks by creators who fall more into the category of fan than those in the previous examples, the music is often similarly ascribed power over listeners' moods and emotional states, and they also often make references that imply an impact on mental health. A TikTok set to Phoebe Bridgers' song "Graceland Too" shows the creator sitting in their room in low lighting throwing themselves around crying in seeming agony (cf. Figure 5-3). The text on screen reads "cause of death: the isolated vocals of julien and lucy in graceland too," with the

caption stating “deceased. #julienbaker #lucydacus #boygenius #phoebebridgers.” “Graceland Too” is about having a friend who is struggling with mental health issues, suicidal ideation, and addiction. It has been speculated to be about Julien Baker, who, together with Lucy Dacus, sings backing vocals on the track despite it being released on Phoebe Bridgers’ solo record (Bridgers, 2020). Although not directly naming the content of the lyrics and its references to mental health issues, the TikTok implies knowledge of the context. Its hyperbolic use of references to death and dying conveys the creator’s strong emotions that are incited by the music and in this case by one specific element of the music that particularly speaks to the listener.

In another TikTok, the creator is shown doing her makeup while mouthing along to the lyrics of the boygenius song “Cool About It” that the TikTok is set to and text overlaying the video states “saying im in my healing era and then listening to this song on repeat no matter what im doing.” While this video does not show the creator expressing their emotions through bodily (re)enaction, it again highlights the impact of music on mood and emotional well-being. The text “saying im in my healing era” communicates that the creator is or wants to be in a better emotional state than she previously was, she is healing from an unspecified previous state. At the same time, continuing this phrase by stating “and then listening to this song on repeat no matter what im doing” implies that the song is negatively counteracting this desire for healing, putting into question the creator’s expressed desire for betterment and simultaneously highlighting the negative impact of music on mental health. By questioning her own commitment to her “healing era,” the creator imbues the TikTok with a slightly ironic and humorous tone that can be read as self-deprecating. While self-deprecating humour is commonly used on social media to create relatability with others (Ask & Abidin, 2018), Thelandersson (2023) argues that this may also create distance from the feelings expressed. In Thelandersson’s argument, when (particularly negative) feelings are positioned at a distance, they feed into a portrayal of what she terms “sanctioned vulnerability,” where representations of mental illness feed back into neoliberal logics of resilience centred on “overcoming” hardships (Thelandersson, 2023, p. 8). Although the TikTok’s reference to “healing era” and its use of self-deprecating humour could thus be seen as falling into this form of sanctioned vulnerability, the creator’s refusal to fully commit to healing and her ongoing engagement with music that hinders her healing journey disavows the progress and resilience narrative of many mainstream depictions of mental illness.

"music is therapy": (Sad) Music as Way of Coping with Mental Health Issues

Even though sad girl music might elicit feelings of sadness, queer youths' engagements with the music on TikTok also show how it can function as a coping mechanism for dealing with these negative emotions and for reflecting on a variety of personal experiences. A common thread in my TikTok dataset involved instances of creators comparing music to therapy or medication. One TikTok features the caption "music is therapy," while others use the more specific hashtag "#mitskiistherapy" to posit listening to Mitski's music as something that can help in processing emotions and life experiences. Again using humour to express emotions, one TikTok that shows the creator singing along to boygenius's "Letter to an Old Poet" features the text "no bc [because] hearing this live did more for me than any ssri [selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, antidepressants] ever could" (cf. Figure 5-4.) In likening the experience of hearing the song in concert to the effects of anti-depressants, the creator articulates the positive impacts music can have on emotional well-being. Similar to taking medication prescribed for coping with depression or anxiety, listening to music can thus provide "a source of survival and affirmation" that can be a tool to "use in strategic ways" (Driver, 2007, p. 226).

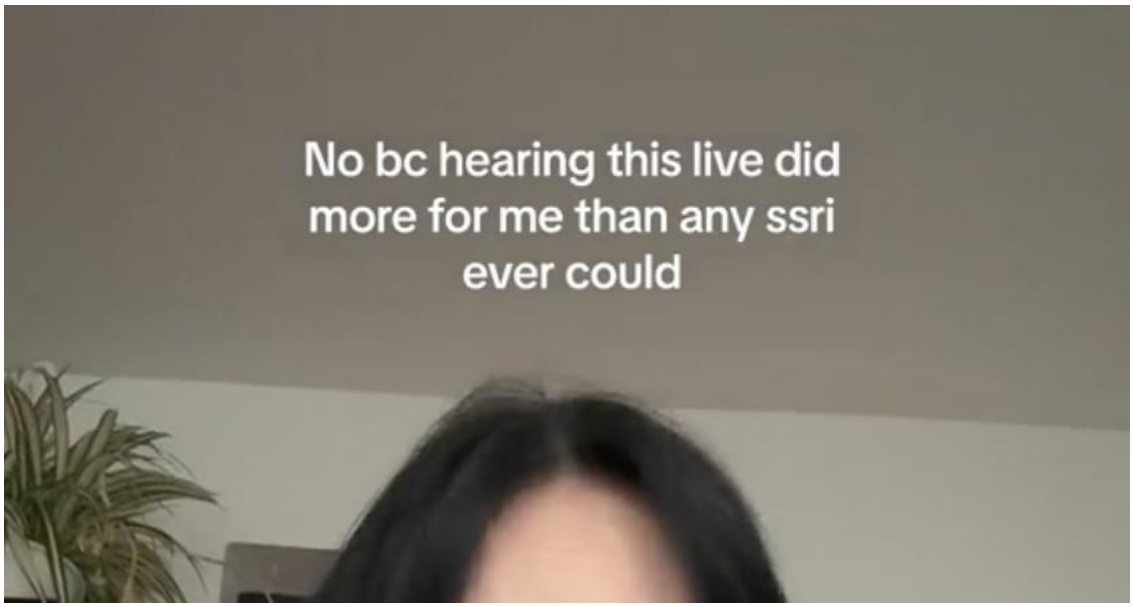

Figure 5-4: music as medication

Within sad girl music TikToks, creators focus on lyrics that they identify with, that help them reflect on their own experiences, and, in some cases, give them strength to continue on with their lives. Similar to Phoebe Bridgers' "Graceland Too" mentioned above, the lyrics of Lucy Dacus's song "Please Stay" discuss the experience of loving someone who is suicidal and trying

everything in one's power to convince them to stay alive (Dacus, 2021b; Moreland, 2021). In a TikTok using the song showing a young person give a thumbs up to the camera, the text on screen states "this whole staying alive thing is a lot harder than I remember but ill do it bc [because] lucy dacus wrote this," while the caption reads "thank u lucy dacus for existing and giving me hope" (cf. Figure 5-5). Reading the text and the video alongside with the lyrics, this TikTok thus expresses how the song has provided the creator with hope for the future, with a reason to go on living. While the song does not erase their current struggles, as shown by the fact that they look like they were crying just moments before, it does allow them to reflect on their feelings, helping them "to clarify their thoughts, and somehow [make] their feelings more comprehensible" (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007, p. 94). Music, just like other art forms, has long been something that people may engage with as a way of dealing with a variety of life experiences and that may serve as a coping mechanism (Holmes, 2023, p. 821; Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). As Grossberg writes, "fans' investment in certain practices and texts provides them with strategies which enable them to gain a certain amount of control over their affective life, which further enables them to invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and identity in order to cope with new forms of pain, pessimism, frustration, alienation, terror and boredom" (1992, p. 65). In this context, identifying and engaging with music that deals with topics such as depression and suicidal ideation can be a way to address one's own experiences related to those topics.

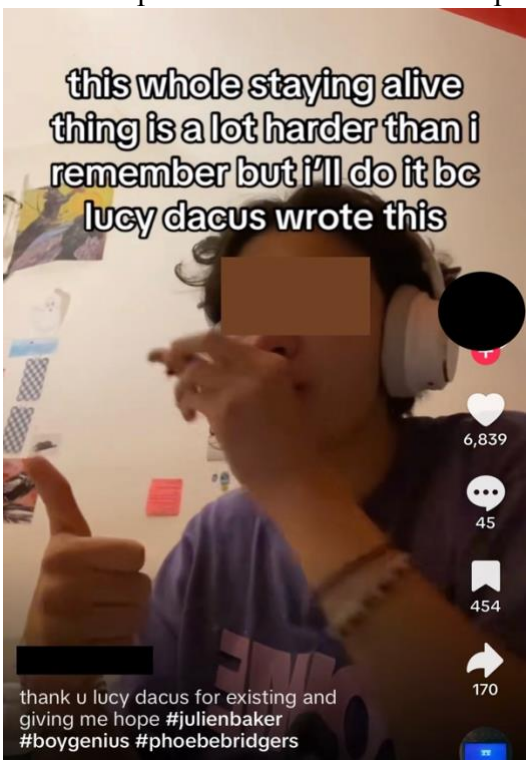

Figure 5-5: music providing hope

Figure 5-6: live music as "healing"

In addition to the value listeners derive from the music and lyrics, the anticipation of experiencing a live performance that means so much to them further provides something to look forward to, and to stay alive for, as becomes discernible in the recurring references to seeing certain songs performed in concert. A TikTok showing fan-recorded footage from a Lucy Dacus concert also set to "Please Stay" features the text "was gonna say 'how am i meant to go on after hearing Please Stay live' but actually i know i can go on forever now. thank u boys i am healed" (cf. Figure 5-6). Meanwhile in a TikTok set to Phoebe Bridgers' "Graceland Too," the creator smiles while singing along to the song, the text on screen asserts "I remember listening to this song on my way home from the hospital not knowing that I would stay alive long enough to witness it live not once, but twice," while the caption proclaims "it gets better I promise! #fyp #phoebebridgers #boygenius #mentalhealth." In both TikToks, the focus is on the positive impact attending a concert has had on the respective creator's mental state. It is something they wanted to be alive for and the fact they were is an indication of the improvement of their mental health. In these TikToks, music and its live performance are thus creating a sense of hope. Describing her experience of hearing "Keep on Livin" by Le Tigre, Cvetkovich writes, "performed live, the song creates an opportunity for the audience to shout out the words as a group and affirm the many kinds of survival that bring them together" (2003, p. 13). The TikToks described above echo a similar sentiment of the ways in which live music performances have affirmed these individuals and supported their survival. Queer youth are able to find identification in sad girl music and relate it to their own experiences in ways that can help them in processing negative feelings.

"ARE WE ALL OKAY!???": Intimate Publics and the Sociality of Sadness

While using emotional music as a coping mechanism for negative feelings is largely a solitary form of engagement, posting about these experiences elevates them to a social level. Posting a TikTok of oneself crying or expressing negative emotions in some other way also asks for one's emotions to be recognized, to be witnessed by others. In a TikTok posted following the release of Mitski's album *The Land Is Inhospitable And So Are We* in September 2023, the creator acts out a conversation with themselves about the new album (cf. Figure 5-7). Displaying the dialogue on screen, the video starts out with the following conversation: "Hey have you heard the new mitski?" "new mitski? Bro give me a listen" "wait just be careful" "careful? Why would I need to be caref-." The last statement is cut off by the creator showing themselves listening to the music while sitting on a bed in a dark room, creating a gloomy and sad atmosphere in the video.

The TikTok thus conveys sadness by reiterating the "danger" of the music and using visual elements depicting sadness. At the same time, by acting out a conversation that focuses on the negative emotions, the creator communicates desire for their sadness to be recognized by others.

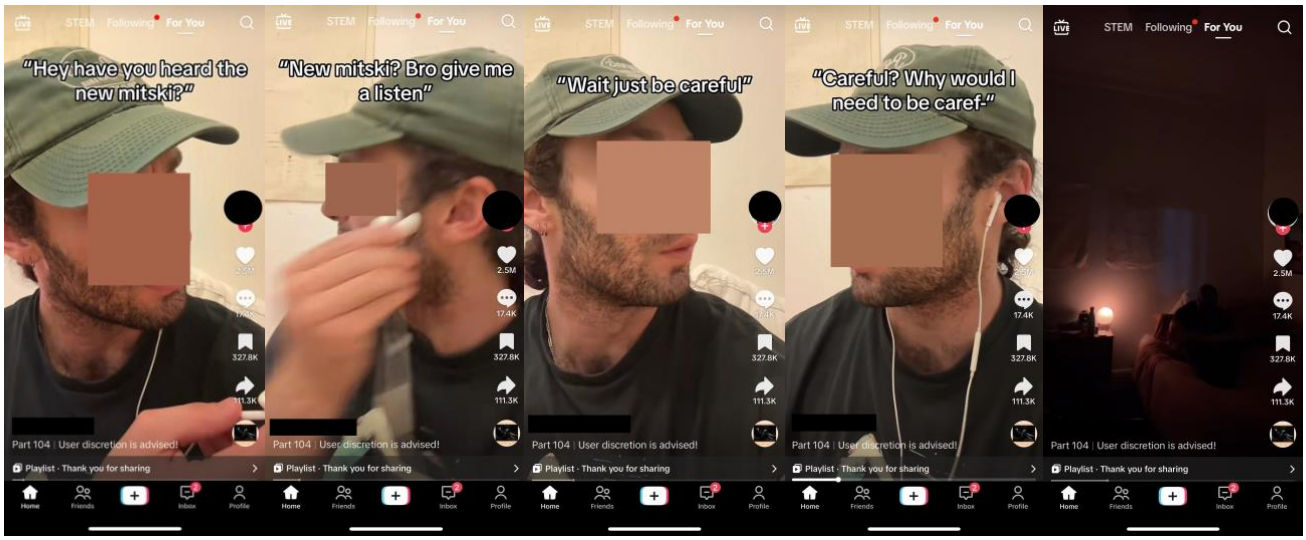

Figure 5-7: Conversation about Emotional Reaction to New Music

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Sara Ahmed writes "there is a connection between the over-representation of pain and its unrepresentability" in that, while one may not be able to "describe 'adequately' the feelings of pain," they may evoke this pain again and again (Ahmed, 2014, p. 22). In my TikTok dataset, the pain of negative feelings is repeatedly evoked in recurring ways; largely through showing the creator crying or through assertions that they are not doing well. These repeated statements of pain illustrate the unrepresentability of pain while also highlighting the creators' desire of being able to convey their pain to others, of having their pain be witnessed. Within Western culture, pain is often represented as inherently solitary due to the difficulty/impossibility of communicating it to others. At the same time, Ahmed argues that pain itself is contingently linked to sociality, where pain simultaneously establishes and breaks boundaries between bodies: "Pain involves the sociality of bodily surfaces (including the surfaces of objects) that 'surface' in relationship to each other" (Ahmed, 2002, p. 25). She argues that it is this "apparent loneliness of pain that requires it to be disclosed to a witness" (Ahmed, 2002, p. 23). One TikTok posted shortly after the release of boygenius' record features the caption "how is everyone feeling. i am not ok," expressing both the creator's own emotions in response to the music, and the creator's concern for other listeners' emotional well-being. In this way, the creator simultaneously asks for others to witness her pain, while also wanting to bear witness to others' pain. As Ahmed writes, "it is because no one can know what it feels like to have my pain that I

want loved others to acknowledge how I feel. The solitariness of pain is intimately tied up with its implication in relationship to others" (2014, p. 29). While it is never possible to truly know someone else's pain, by witnessing their pain, it is granted "the status of an event, a happening in the world" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 29), and it is this desire for their sadness to be witnessed that becomes apparent in many sad girl music TikToks.

With the expressions of sadness and pain themselves thus deeply embedded in the relationships to others, in the act of witnessing, and therefore in a certain sociality of sadness, they also contribute to the formation of intimate publics that are centred around an affect of sadness. Gibbs defines affective resonance as "the positive feedback loops created by affect, and in particular the tendency of someone witnessing the display of affect in another person to resonate with and experience the same affect in response" (A. Gibbs, 2013, pp. 131–132). In this context, the sharing of negative emotions and feelings in relation to the music on TikTok resonates with other users who in turn share about their own negative emotions and feelings and come to feel a connection with one another. Similar to what Thelandersson foregrounded in her study of 2010s sad girl culture (2023, p. 161), through this recurring affective resonance, users on TikTok form a shared "sad girl affect" that is specific to the platform and user practices and revolves around sadness. As such, the sharing of negative emotions and the music's impact does not just allow the TikToks' creators to process their own emotions, but it allows them to feel in community with others experiencing similar things which can make them feel less alone.

Within sad girl music TikToks, creators repeatedly refer to a collective "we" and mention other users' content that aligns with their own, such as in the opening example in which the creator asked "sad girlies how are we doing rn??" (cf. Figure 1-1). Another TikTok set to the boygenius song "Letter to an Old Poet" and posted shortly after the release of the album features the caption "ARE WE ALL OKAY!??? This album had me sobbing at 9am." The creators thus address other fans and listeners through both the term "sad girlies" and the use of "we." Although both these forms of address are quite vague and open-ended, they nonetheless demarcate a community or public of individuals who are connected through their (emotional) engagement with and reaction to the music. Both TikToks convey an underlying assumption of shared experiences between the creators and those they address. In this sense, these TikToks show evidence of the formation of intimate publics between creators and users engaging with sad girl music TikTok. Lauren Berlant conceptualizes an intimate public as a public sphere centred around shared aesthetics and affective

attachments. As such, its consumers are expected to "*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (Berlant, 2008, p. viii). In this way, intimate publics provide "a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general" and serves as a "place of recognition and reflection" (p. viii). In sad girl music TikToks, this sense of connection with strangers who are assumed to share a certain experience therefore constitutes an intimate public that takes the music as its central object of affective attachment. The focus on (negative) emotions thus also functions as an expression of community and belonging. By creating TikToks reacting to the music, or discussing how the music serves as a coping mechanism for processing negative emotions, queer youth on TikTok participate in and sustain this intimate public. In this context, the vagueness of many TikToks that refer to the collective as an unspecified "we" is not a bug, but a feature. By remaining vague, participants can more easily identify with the sentiments being expressed, and "project a sense that they are similar to unknown others" (Kanai, 2017, p. 297). A TikTok set to "Letter to an Old Poet" and focusing on the parallels between the song and the earlier boygenius song "Me & My Dog" features the text "posting about this along with every other mentally ill girl on your timeline because wtf." By positing her TikTok as part of a slew of other TikToks about the same topic, the creator locates herself as similar to these other creators who fall into the category of "mentally ill girl." Her reaction might not be special, but it is that lack of singularity that makes her part of a broader community, of an imagined intimate public. Even when people expressing their emotions don't actually have the exact same experiences, the similarities in their reactions, the similarities in affect are what create a sense of belonging between them (Muchitsch, 2024, p. 239).

Ordinary Sadness: Societal Contexts and the Suffering of Everyday Life

On TikTok, sad girl music itself functions as the object that queer youth can project their desire for connection onto and unite around. As Berlant writes, "one of the main jobs of minoritized arts that circulate through mass culture is to tell identifying consumers that 'you are not alone (in your struggles, desires, pleasures)'" (Berlant, 2008, p. ix). Living in a largely hetero-patriarchal world, queer youth, like other minoritized people and communities, often face not having their identities and struggles recognized which can lead them to feeling isolated in their struggles. As Berlant writes, "aloneness is one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally underprivileged" (Berlant, 2008, p. ix). Thus, receiving confirmation that they are not alone is important to confronting this loneliness, and the intimate publics formed around sad girl music

"provide frames for encountering the impacts of living" in the world as a minoritized person (Berlant, 2008, p. x).

Released in October 2021 as the first single off her album *Laurel Hell*, Mitski's song "Working for the Knife" addresses this theme of the pressures of everyday life, reflecting on unfulfilled dreams, the feeling of being left behind, while continuing to work for something that doesn't serve her (Mitski, 2021). The song's metaphor of the knife that she works, lives, and dies for can be interpreted in different ways. Whether it symbolizes the externally oppressive force of capitalism and structural inequalities, or refers to the internally oppressive force of mental illness, the knife is something she cannot escape. While the song's first verse addresses her desire for creativity and artistic creation, this desire is stifled by having to work for the knife. The art she wants to create is not what is valued by the capitalist context of audiences and creative industries: "I used to think I would tell stories/ But nobody cared for the stories I had about/ No good guys." Considering Mitski's previous statements in the press about the pressures she feels within the music industry, this can be interpreted as reflecting on these experiences where her efforts feel in vain, where she continues sacrificing pieces of herself only to still not be valued adequately. She sings "I always knew the world moves on/ I just didn't know it would go without me/ I start the day high and it ends so low/ 'Cause I'm working for the knife," expressing that she feels like life has passed her by while she continues working for the very forces that keep her limited.

These sentiments of the struggles of everyday life, of having to go on working, providing for capitalism, no matter one's context, get taken up in TikToks set to the song. One TikTok shows a young person smiling under the text "thank you mitski for releasing this absolute banger at the start of my 70hr work week 💔" with the caption "i rly [really] am working, living, and dy1ng for the kn1fe rn [right now] huh 🧐 !!". In combination with the text, caption, and music, the person's smile feels put on, like that of a customer service worker having to do the emotional labour of putting on a happy face at all times (Hochschild, 2012). The creator relates the song to their own experiences, having to constantly go on working no matter the context. Another TikTok features the text "mitski pls [please] i'm trying so hard not to cry in class rn [right now]," similarly highlighting how our societal context requires pushing away emotions in favour of continuing to fulfill the everyday tasks and productivity expected under capitalism.

Mitski's songs and these TikToks thus bring to the forefront the ordinary suffering of everyday life. In her book *Depression: A public feeling* (2012), Ann Cvetkovich "takes up

depression as a keyword in order to describe the affective dimensions of ordinary life in the present moment" (p. 11). She describes everyday life as producing "feelings of despair and anxiety, sometimes extreme, sometimes throbbing along at a low level, and hence barely discernible from just the way things are, feelings that get internalized and named, for better or for worse, as depression" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 14). In this way, she posits the suffering, the sadness that comes to be termed as depression, as ordinary. Within neoliberal society, this ordinary depression is thus pathologized and, as such, the impacts of social problems are categorized into individual failings (p. 12). In many Western countries, the increased political and economic interest in happiness is accompanied by high levels of depression and mental illness. The countries apparently most committed to eliminating misery seem to be the ones most engulfed by it (Segal, 2017, p. 33). The conditions neoliberalist ideals of individualism bestow on people leave them feeling like they themselves are responsible for achieving— or failing to achieve— some form of happiness. If they fail to achieve it, they are told to believe that they have failed as individuals and are "encouraged by both the psychiatric profession and also the world at large to see our misery as coming from within" (Segal, 2017, p. 39), even when it is the system itself that fails them in a lot of ways.

In this context, Cvetkovich argues that, by accepting rather than dismissing negative feelings, these negative feelings can, in fact, teach us about happiness (p. 3). If negative feelings can thus be depathologized, they may open possibilities for political action. Though not transformed into a wholly positive experience, the affective experiences of depression may "become sites of publicity and community formation" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 2). Within the sad girl music TikToks described above, creators make connections between their sadness and the societal context they live in. This connection is again highlighted in another TikTok similarly set to Mitski's "Working for the Knife" showing a young person singing along to the lyrics with an exasperated expression overlaid by the caption "mitski really wrote this song for all the people that started working really young (13-17) and then could never stop. you sell whats left of your childhood for $13 an hour" with the caption "once you start working you really never stop" (cf. Figure 5-8). By linking the song to their experiences of having to start working at a young age, the TikTok thus points to an awareness of how the structural pressures of capitalism impact people's emotions and feelings of sadness and exasperation.

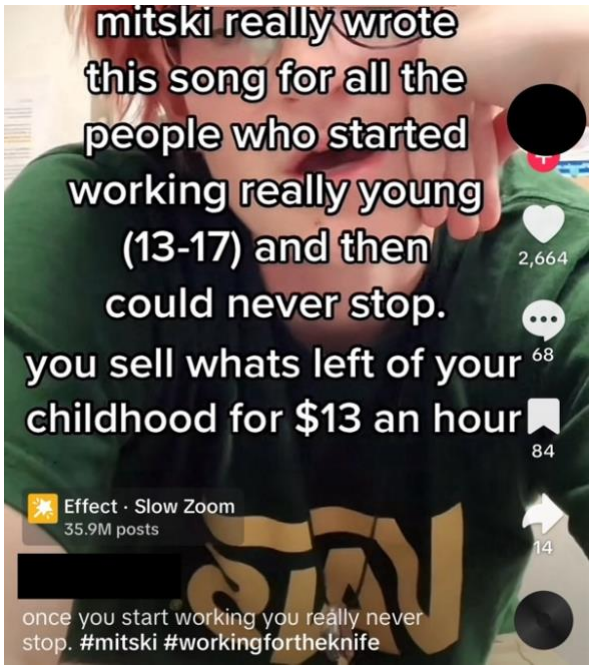

Figure 5-8: "once you start working you really never stop"

Overarchingly, these TikToks and the music itself present sadness and suffering as emotions that are not only determined by moments of extraordinary shock. For the most part, the TikToks do not name specific incidents or moments of trauma, but instead revolve around the everyday affects of sadness. As Blackman (2015) argues, "reframing suffering as 'ordinary', not an exceptional phenomenon, but rather part and parcel of the costs of neo-liberalism(s)" (p. 26). Even while not engaging in explicit political action or expression, these kinds of TikToks present negative emotions not just as an individual burden, but as existing in a societal context as well, particularly making reference to capitalism.

"sadness for a future that has disappeared"

The underlying affect of sadness within sad girl music TikToks is thus of particular interest in considering the music's popularity, particularly with young queer people. One TikTok in my dataset takes a close look at this popularity as it shows the creator in front of a picture of boygenius hypothesizing answers to the question "why is everyone obsessed with boygenius?" stated in the caption. He argues that the boygenius listenership is largely made up of older Gen Z and younger millennials who were promised a certain vision of the future where society would continue on an upward trend toward realizing progressive ideas, who "did all the right things," trusting "that if they followed the rules, our society would continue its ascendency toward some exceptionally

progressive American utopia," but who are now confronted with "the possibility that things are not going to get better and specifically that things are going to get worse in our lifetimes." As such, the retreat into sadness and sad music acts as a form of mourning, it is "a sadness for a future that has disappeared," expressing a feeling of being stuck between the loss of this promised future and the past we can't go back to. He argues that this retreat into sadness puts the onus of fixing the future on younger Gen Z, absolving listeners of that responsibility. While the creator doesn't see this as entirely bad, rather describing it as "real," he also states that "when bands that are singing about mental health and depression are filling stadiums of young people and specifically very privileged young professional demographics, red flags should be going off." A PhD student who also wrote a short text on Substack on the same topic (Bryant, 2023), the creator ends the video by making reference to Antonio Gramsci's notion of the interregnum, which describes a period where the previous system of social order is in a state of deterioration but a new social order has not been established yet (Gramsci, 2007). The TikTok thus posits boygenius as "the sound of the interregnum" in which "everyone just seems to be waiting."

As one of few TikToks in my dataset to use a talking head video, to focus on a broader analysis of sad music as a phenomenon, and to be created by a white man, this TikTok might not be representative of the majority of sad girl music content, but it brings up some relevant points and describes some connections to societal contexts that listeners are drawing within sad girl music TikToks more broadly. While overarchingly well-received with over 21k likes, the video also drew criticism in the comments for omitting discussions about the elements of queerness and gender, and the ways in which queer joy emerges both in the music itself and in the fanbase largely made up of queer women. Nonetheless, the creator's description of sad music as a reaction to the disappearance of certain standards of living and progressive ideals resonates with Cvetkovich's argument about depression as the response to political failure (2012). She defines political depression as "the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 1). The TikTok's portrayal of boygenius listeners as older Gen Z and Millennials who retreat into sadness and waiting echoes this feeling of uncertainty about how to go forward and the band's album *The Record* itself in fact illustrates this liminal space further. The last lyrics on the album's final song "Letter to an Old Poet" are "I wanna be happy/ I'm ready to walk into my room without lookin' for you/ I'll go up to the top of our building/ And remember

my dog when I see the full moon// I can't feel it yet/ But I am waiting" (boygenius, 2023b). The vinyl record of the album utilizes a locked groove, a function usually meant to keep the needle and tonearm of the record player from drifting into the label area, to eternally repeat the song's last word "waiting." One TikTok points this out, showing the record spinning on a player accompanied by the text "not boygenius making the record of 'the record' eternally skip in the middle of them saying 'but I am waiting'" (188_letter_maceydowns_0401). Here, the music, and the physical record in particular, exemplify the sense of waiting described in the TikTok mentioned above.

Cvetkovich, building on elaborations by Feel Tank Chicago and Berlant, uses the concept of impasse to describe "the notion of depression as a state of being 'stuck,' of not being able to figure out what to do or why to do it" (2012, p. 20). While retreating into sadness can thus be seen as inhibiting action, Cvetkovich argues that an impasse can also be a site of potential, forcing us to slow down in a way that might be worth exploring. Impasse "suggests that things will not move forward due to circumstance—not that they can't, but that the world is not designed to make it happen or there has been a failure of imagination" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 20). Sitting with sadness thus can provide a space of reflection while simultaneously countering neoliberal self-help and confidence discourses where vulnerability and failure are allowed "only under the condition that it has been overcome" (Orgad & Gill, 2022, p. 96). Instead, the retreat into sadness represented in many sad girl music TikToks stays with and ruminates on the negative emotions.

Looking at the song "Letter to an Old Poet" in the context of its parallels to boygenius's 2018 song "Me & My Dog," it can also be interpreted as portraying a sense of moving forward, going from "I wanna be emaciated" to "I wanna be happy." Both songs deal with an abusive relationship but the approach to that relationship has changed with time. The last lines of "Me & My Dog" take an escapist path: "I wanna be emaciated/ I wanna hear one song without thinkin' of you/ I wish I was on a spaceship/ Just me and my dog and an impossible view// I dream about it/ And I wake up falling" (boygenius, 2018c). They express a sense of wanting to return to the honeymoon phase of the relationship no matter what that might take; a sense of wanting to be away from the current situation, but that escape seems impossible. In contrast, the last lines of "Letter to an Old Poet" appear more hopeful, a bit further removed from the direct context of the abusive relationship: "I wanna be happy/ I'm ready to walk into my room without lookin' for you/ I'll go up to the top of our building/ And remember my dog when I see the full moon// I can't feel it yet/ But I am waiting" (boygenius, 2023b). The song's lyrical subject is not fully free from the

relationship, but is ready to leave it behind. They no longer want to escape all the way to space, seeing the moon from the top of the building will be enough. While they aren't quite there yet, they are now waiting, on the path to another future, no longer falling. As such, "Letter to an Old Poet" provides a follow-up to "Me & My Dog" that depicts the slow process of starting to heal from difficult experiences. While these songs are mostly focused on a personal relationship, this approach to the slow process of hope can also be transposed onto political contexts. Sadness here functions as something that hinders action, but that also allows for a space of reflection. As Summer Kim Lee writes in their analysis of Asian-American asociality in the work of Mitski and Ocean Vuong, there is a certain value in the seemingly asocial: "while going out into the streets in protest, going out to be with others, and the desire to be seen and heard are crucial to the kinds of flourishing that minoritarian political critique seeks beyond the grind of everyday life, there is also the need for staying in, which is not antithetical to but, rather, enfolded within and adjacent to these acts and desires" (Lee, 2019, p. 32). As such, the retreat into negative emotions can provide an important counterbalance and respite to the largely collective work of imagining and fighting for a future.

Similarly, boygenius's song "Afraid of Heights," released in October 2023 as part of their EP *the rest*, demonstrates a form of sadness and disappointment in the decline of possible futures that is nonetheless oriented toward the future (boygenius, 2023a). Focusing on a relationship that falls apart due to one partner's risk-seeking actions and the other's averseness to risk, the song ruminates on what it means to be radical in the context of socio-economic inequities, the privileges of living "a life that isn't dangerous," and hopes for the future. For listeners on TikTok, the lyrics "I wanna live a vibrant life/ but I wanna die a boring death" are particularly resonant. One TikTok showing the creator reacting emotionally features the text, "there is no way boygenius wrote the lines 'I wanna live a vibrant life / but I wanna die a boring death' and expected me to be remotely okay afterwards." The caption meanwhile states "it hurts to hope for the future!," referencing another part of the song's lyrics: "Oh, it hurts to hope the future/ Will be better than before." These engagements thus communicate that the lyrics addressing desires for life and the future illicit strong feelings within the creator about their own future which they want to feel hopeful for but also can't shake their worries about. They highlight how the popularity sad girl music predominantly among young queer people exemplifies the ways this continual attachment to a future state of happiness can also be a painful one.

This longing for a future that one is simultaneously disenchanted with similarly gets taken up in TikToks engaging with Mitski's music. One TikTok shows the creator looking at the camera with a somber expression and features the text "with every new song that Mitski puts out, it becomes more difficult to imagine sisyphus as happy" (cf. Figure 5-9). Here, the creator connects Mitski's music to the Greek mythology of Sisyphus and to Albert Camus's philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) in which he introduces his philosophy of the absurd. Absurdism posits that the world is inherently meaningless and irrational, but that peoples' need to attribute it meaning creates a conflict which renders existence absurd. In his book, Camus explores different approaches to this absurd life. The final part of the essay takes up the Greek mythology of Sisyphus. Condemned to spend eternity pushing a rock up a hill, only for that rock to roll down every time it reaches the top, requiring him to start anew, Sisyphus stands in as the absurd hero who, in acknowledging the futility of his situation, can reach contentment. Camus ends with the line: "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1955). The TikTok's reference to Sisyphus thus engages with

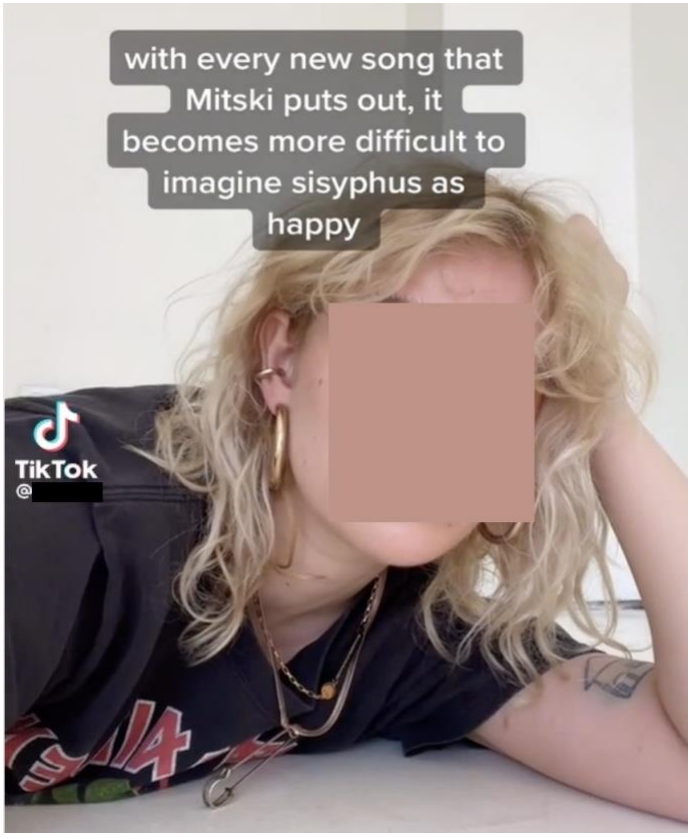

Figure 5-9: "with every new song that Mitski puts out, it becomes more difficult to imagine sisyphus as happy"

conceptions of happiness in the context of an absurd life where Mitski's music is making the creator reflect on their own relation to happiness. The creator expresses that, despite their understanding of life as absurd, they are having a hard time finding contentment and happiness in that absurdity. Nonetheless, the wording "it becomes more difficult" suggests that they don't want to turn away from happiness but continue longing for it. At the same time, their disillusionment with life also highlights their uncertainty about what the happiness they are yearning for actually looks like, a sentiment that gets repeatedly taken up in sad girl music. In her song "Townie," Mitski sings: "'Cause we've tried hungry and we've tried full/And nothing seems enough" (Mitski, 2014c), illustrating the feeling of attempting different ways to achieve certain expectations, but never being fully satisfied and instead always continuing to long for more. Similarly, in "Texas Reznikoff," she sings "But I've been anywhere and it's not what I want" (Mitski, 2014b), again emphasizing the futile journey of trying to achieve what she believes will make her happy, but having to realize that it does not bring her where she wants to be.

TikToks in my dataset thus mainly mention happiness as an absence: as something to strive toward, but that remains out of reach. In this context, the negative emotions and sadness of yearning express discontent with one's situation in life and with the broader societal structures and contexts that determine it. The focus on sadness highlights how the broader socio-political context is impacting queer youth's hopes and anxieties for the future. Overarchingly, discourses emerging in TikToks depicting ordinary forms of sadness allow queer youth to understand their own sadness and negative emotions as existing within broader socio-political contexts that directly impact emotional states and mental health.

Political Potentials: Sad Girl Music, Emotions, and Engaging with Politics

While these TikToks already make connections to broader contexts, to the feeling of not being able to have the life one imagined due to structural issues and inequalities, other TikToks in my dataset take the music and emotions as a starting point for an explicit engagement with politics. With the music and sad girl music TikToks often expressing longing for better futures and making connections to broader societal contexts and discourses, music can provide a spark for political consciousness. One TikTok set to Mitski's "Drunk Walk Home" shows the creator talking to the camera stating:

> I think we really underestimate music as a way of expressing political ideas. Like yeah you could say, 'we may never live in an equitable society, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't help each other, and fight back and refuse to live in the way corporations want us to.' or, you could say: 'for I'm starting to learn I may never be free, but though I may never be free, fuck you and your money' just a thought

In this way, the creator posits the song's lyrics as akin to political expressions. In "Drunk Walk Home," Mitski captures a sense of hopelessness and disillusionment with life that follows the end of a night out marked by rejection (Mitski, 2014a). While the song communicates a yearning for human connection, the lyrics referenced in the TikTok also articulate a realization that these dreams, this longing, might be futile, "For [she is] starting to learn [she] may never be free," which is then followed by a refusal, an exclamation against what she knows, what she has been told to value: "Fuck you and your money." It is a refusal to fit into the preordained life that has been set out for her, a refusal to accept the current state of late-stage capitalism. The TikTok creator expands on the political implications of these lyrics, highlighting how music fandom and engagement with lyrics can lead to engaging with more explicitly political content and ideas.

One TikTok consisting of videos of Mitski screaming into the microphone during live performances features the text "maturing is realizing it isn't just who's president, it's america as a whole" (cf. Figure 5-10). Instead of specifically making connections between that statement and the lyrics, the TikTok creates an affective association between Mitski's rage and general discontent with the American political system. As such, in this TikTok, emotions themselves function as a political expression.

By being exposed to political content on their For You Page, sad girl music listeners on TikTok can come to associate these political ideas with the music and the emotional videos they are already engaging with. In this way, they learn to link their experiences of mental illness with critical, anti-capitalist thought, allowing them to understand sadness as part of and stemming from structural issues (Thelandersson, 2023, p. 183). Even when not directly invoking the lyrics, TikToks combining images of artists and music with political expressions allow audiences to become attuned to political thought. These associations are further strengthened by artists' own political expressions. Boygenius have been very vocal about their support of queer and trans people, and youth in particular, and have protested anti-drag legislations. At their June 2023 concert in Nashville, Tennessee where a public anti-drag law was signed by the governor but later

Figure 5-10: "maturing is realizing it isn't just who's president, it's america as a whole"

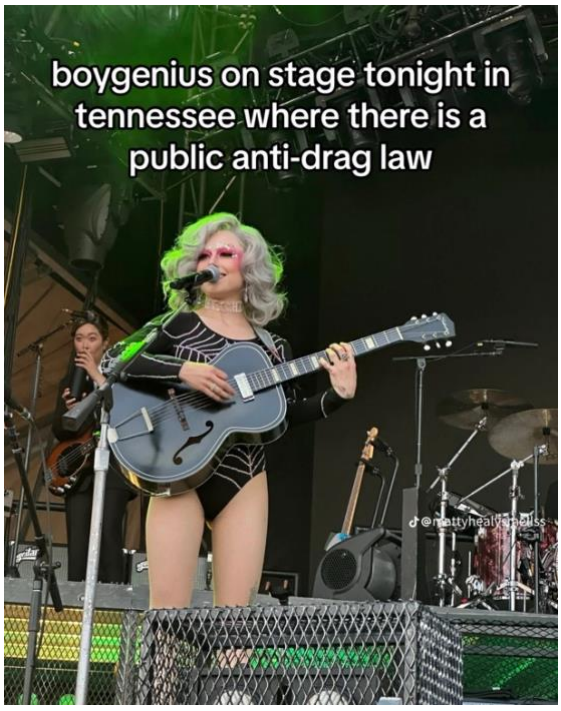

Figure 5-11: boygenius protesting anti-drag law

deemed unconstitutional by a federal judge, the band took the stage in drag in order to protest these kinds of anti-LGBTQ+ laws. As a Tennessee native, Julien Baker talked about her own experiences with queer oppression and led the crowd in a "Fuck (Governor) Bill Lee" chant (Ruiz & Hussey, 2023). These forms of political protest then make their way onto TikTok, where multiple videos shared footage from the concert (cf. Figure 5-11), thus expanding the reach of the artists' protest to online audiences who were not present at the concert.

Similarly, the artists' expressions on social media can further introduce fans and audiences to political issues. In July 2023, former US President Barack Obama shared his yearly summer playlist and included "Not Strong Enough" by boygenius. In response, Lucy Dacus quote-tweeted Obama's post, writing "war criminal :(" (Aniftos, 2023). A screenshot of this response was reposted to TikTok, again allowing it to reach sad girl music audiences on the platform (cf. Figure 5-12). While Dacus' tweet does not explain why she refers to Obama as a war criminal, seeing such statements made by an artist might lead fans to look into criticism of Obama's actions while in office, such as his approval of drone warfare. As such, even though the tweet does not state specific calls for action, it may raise audiences' political consciousness.

Figure 5-12: TikTok reposting Lucy Dacus' Tweet calling Barack Obama a war criminal

At the same time, artists' public statements about their political beliefs create an assumption of shared values within fandom spaces. In one TikTok, the creator contends that holding conservative views, specifically anti-abortion views, and listening to Phoebe Bridgers' music is contradictory due to the artist's statements and actions. Set to Bridgers' song "ICU" which the creator is singing along to, the text on screen reads "Saw a girl use this song to talk about her anti-ab0rtion beliefs which is ironic bc [because] Phoebe had an ab0rtion." The TikTok references a post Bridgers made in 2022, the day after Roe v. Wade was overturned in the US, in which she wrote: "I went to Planned Parenthood where they gave me the abortion pill. It was easy. Everyone deserves that kind of access." and linked to different abortion funds in states with restricted access (Snapes, 2022). By calling the song's use in an anti-abortion context ironic and referring to Bridgers' statement, the creator expresses their assumption that people listening to the music should share basic political views. In this way, the TikTok further highlights the normalization of political deliberations within sad girl music content and publics (Jenkins, 2016, p. 54), illustrating that its members and participants largely imagine sad girl music spaces as aligned with leftist politics and values, even when not necessarily taking part in explicit political actions. At the same time, the creator's use of 'algospeak' visible in spelling abortion as "ab0rtion" points to how creators attempt to circumvent the platform's content moderation practices, which are known to have at times restricted contents by and about LGBTQ+, disabled, and BIPOC users (Steen et al.,

2023). Algospeak presents both a strategy to counter the possibility of shadowbanning, and again highlights a shared understanding of how political statements can be expressed to nonetheless reach the intended audience through the use of shared vernacular.

This awareness of sad girl music TikTok audiences as generally attuned to progressive politics can further allow people to draw attention to specific political causes, knowing that this political content will most likely largely be met with understanding and support. Multiple TikToks in my dataset used sad girl music songs and sounds to raise awareness about the situation of queer Palestinians in Gaza living through Israeli occupation and genocide. Posted in October 2023 and set to Mitski's "A Burning Hill," one slideshow TikTok is made up of screenshots from the *Queering the Map* project, showing confessions from queer Palestinians (cf. Figure 5-13). Created in Montreal in 2017 by Lucas LaRochelle, *Queering the Map* is "a community-generated counter-mapping platform that digitally archives queer experience in relation to physical space" (LaRochelle, 2020, p. 133) by allowing users to drop pins in specific places on a world map and add text that documents their queer experiences. The TikTok thus draws attention to queer Palestinians' experiences, while the caption also calls out the ways in which pinkwashing of Israel is used to justify lack of support for Palestinians. The caption reads, "Can't stop thinking about these, can't stop crying over them. May the people that cheered for their destruction never know

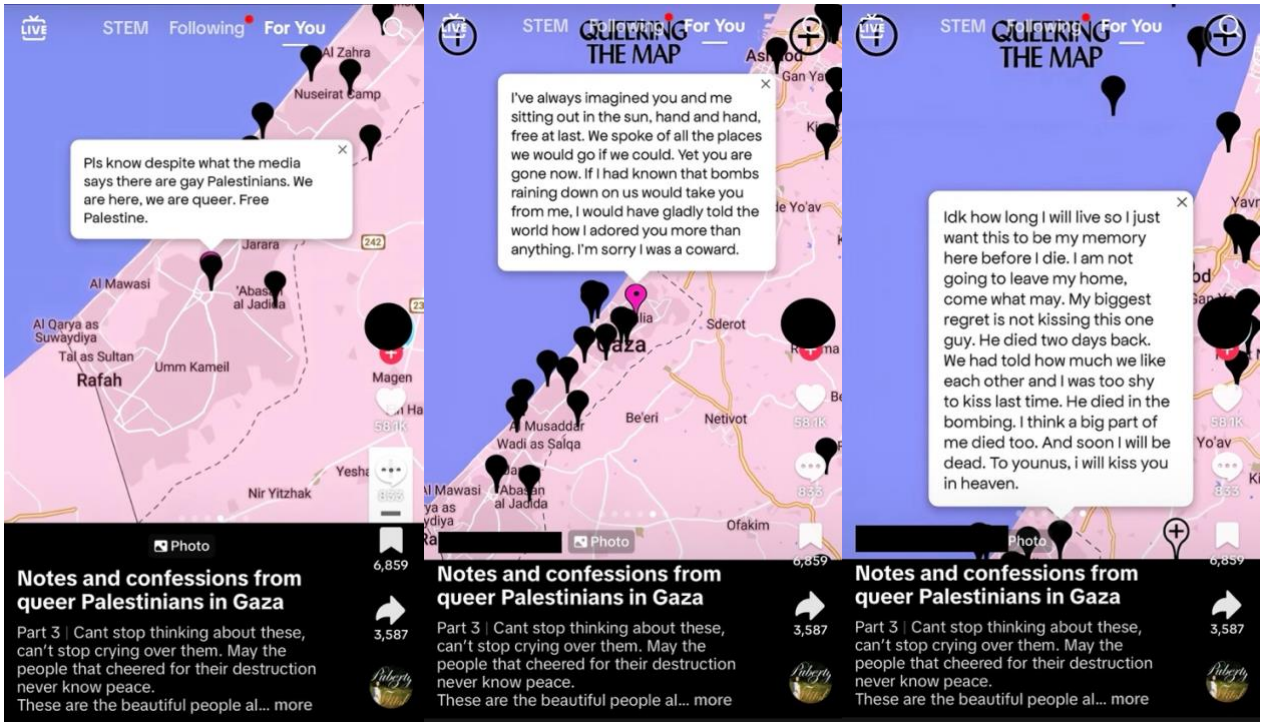

Figure 5-13: Slides from TikTok featuring Queering the Map Screenshots

peace. These are the beautiful people all you smug liberals are erasing when you cite homophobia as the reason for your reluctance to support Palestine. Queer Palestinians exist. #freepalestine." At the time of posting this TikTok, the song it is set to was not trending on the platform. As such, the TikTok would not have reached mainstream popularity just due to a trending sound, but most likely would have been promoted to users who had previously engaged with similar sad girl music sounds and content. While it is not possible to know the creator's specific intentions and considerations in choosing the sound for their TikTok, the association of sad girl music with queerness and leftist political values most likely facilitated it receiving a positive response. Further, the TikTok's caption's reference to crying, "Can't stop thinking about these, can't stop crying over them," evokes sadness in a way that aligns with the overarching affect of sadness in sad girl music TikTok, but redirects that sadness away from the personal toward the political. Here, expressions of emotions hence function as a conduit through which political engagements can be redirected.

Discussion

Overarchingly, the negative emotions expressed in sad girl TikToks thus move from functioning largely on an individual level of personal experiences with mental illness, to a means of forming connections with others experiencing similar emotions, to expressions of discontent with one's situation in life and with the broader societal structures and contexts that determine it, to becoming a potential tool for political engagements. On the individual level, sad girl music TikToks highlight the impact of music on mood and emotional well-being. They show how engaging with emotional music can simultaneously reinforce negative emotions, while also providing a lens for processing personal experiences and negative emotions. As such, the music functions as a way of understanding one's emotions better. At the same time, engaging with Sara Ahmed's work on the sociality of pain (2014), Lauren Berlant's concept of intimate publics (2008), and Ann Cvetkovich's work on depression and ordinary sadness (2012), sad girl music TikToks highlight the inherent sociality of sadness, and queer youth's desire for their sadness to be recognized and for connection with others. In posting about their emotions on a public social media platform like TikTok, queer youth move their emotions from an individual to a communal level that allows them to connect with others and feel like part of an intimate public of people that share certain affective attachments and experiences. Connecting this to my analysis of fandom practices in the previous chapter, due to the desire for recognition and connection, emotions in sad girl music TikToks are often expressed in similar, sometimes hyperbolic, ways that use fandom practices in

order to be legible to the specific audience they are aimed at. Even though they employ similar formats and vernaculars, most of these expressions nonetheless focus on personal specificity of experience and don't aim to produce a universal view of sadness. However, the desire for recognition and connection can at times lead to sadness and pain being portrayed in a one-dimensional way.

Fetishization of Sadness?

Sad girl cultures have long been critiqued for presenting sadness in a glamorized fashion: "Tumblr's most visible version of the Sad Girl trope was that of tragically beautiful, a suffering that was intriguing instead of pitiful" (Poolen, 2024). With the performance of authenticity being an integral part of TikTok's platform vernacular, TikToks engaging with sad girl music are less focused on presenting suffering as inherently beautiful and 'aesthetic,' instead aiming to present sadness as 'raw' emotion. Nonetheless, in centring sadness which is often communicated through the depiction of creators crying, crying TikToks might still end up creating a reductive image of mental illness where the only appropriate reaction to the music is one of intense emotions. While the majority of TikToks in my dataset do not essentialize sadness and leave some space for differences in depictions, one TikTok stands out for its reductive depiction of mental illnesses and pathologization of sadness. Set to Phoebe Bridgers' song "Funeral," the TikTok is a 6-picture slide show captioned "your mental health issue based on your favourite phoebe bridgers song 😈," associating different mental illnesses and issues with Phoebe Bridgers songs (cf. Figure 5-14). The slides are done in a scrapbook style, featuring pictures of Phoebe Bridgers, screenshots of song lyrics, and 'aesthetic' imagery related to the respective songs in order to portray mental health issues as aesthetics and identity categories. The TikTok groups together terms that are recognized medical diagnoses ("depression" or "anxiety") with terms which may in some cases be related to mental health disorders but are in themselves not medical terms ("attachment issues" or "self isolation"). By equating these terms without differentiation, the TikTok presents a flattened representation of mental illness. As such, while bringing mental illness to the forefront may 'normalize' discussion around mental health, this kind of representation can also trivialize it, creating an idealized "aesthetic" conception that may ignore the 'uglier' sides of mental illness. Related to my analysis of identity conceptions within sad girl music TikToks, this depiction thus takes mental illness as an identity. Drawing on Wendy Brown's argument that "there has been a fetishization of the wound in subaltern politics," Ahmed (2014) explores how the positioning of

pain itself as an identity "cuts the wound off from a history of 'getting hurt' or injured" (p. 32) While the association of certain songs with mental health issues might help the creator themselves in understanding their own experiences and while connection can be an important part in processing one's sadness, the generalized depiction presents it in an aestheticized way, highlighting how the desire for relatability, recognition, and connection can further monolithic and fetishizing depictions of mental illness.

Figure 5-14: "your mental health issue based on your favourite phoebe bridgers song" (Slides 1, 2, 6)

Despite this example of sadness being portrayed in a fetishized way, the same does not apply to all expressions of emotions in sad girl music TikToks. As such, the use of hyperbole and fandom practices in expressions of sadness should not be viewed as generally fetishizing pain, but as shaping the expressions in a way legible to the intended audience, as communicating emotions in a specific context to a specific audience. At the same time, the question of when a representation of sadness becomes fetishizing brings up the broader issue of how representations of female pain in particular are often quickly dismissed as performative, cliché, or fetishizing. As Jamison writes in her "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," "the wounded woman gets called a stereotype, and sometimes she is. But sometimes she's just true. I think the possibility of fetishizing pain is no

reason to stop representing it. Pain that gets performed is still pain. Pain turned trite is still pain" (2014, p. 128). Although it is important to recognize how sad girl music TikToks can engage in fetishizations of sadness, it is thus also important to acknowledge how representations of female pain are often disregarded from the get-go.

Discourses of Race and Implicit Whiteness in Sad Girl Music TikToks

At the same time, it is also important to consider how the desire for connection can sideline diversity in its quest for relatability. Of particular importance in considering the broader implications of sad girl TikToks' representation of sadness is the way in which emotions are racialized and how this shapes the discourses around the topic (C. Brown, 2019). The large presence of content addressing sexuality and gender within my dataset underscores the comparatively smaller focus on race, which is addressed only in a few TikToks. Two discuss the importance of recognizing that Mitski's songs specifically reflect her struggles as a woman of colour. One TikTok showing the creator recording themselves in the mirror features the text "mitski is a woc [woman of colour] who writes about woc problems" and is captioned "not to gatekeep mitski for woc girls and gays but mitski is for the woc girls and gays <3 #mitski" (cf. Figure 5-15). Another TikTok set to the song "Goodbye, My Danish Sweetheart" displays the creator overlaid with text reading "mitski does make music about her struggles as a woc, but this song is NOT ONE OF THEM! Mitski has said 'when you listen to an album its yours, its no longer the artists, so you can do what you want with it.' this song is surface level, it is a song about idolizing your partner and viewing yourself as worse/lesser than them. your best american girl and strawberry blonde ARE about her struggles as a woc, but this song is simply a love song and people can create their own interpretations, it only becomes a problem when people act like the *real* meaning of the song is an interpretation." (cf. Figure 5-16). Both TikToks thus draw attention to the topic of race as in Mitski's music and address the discourses circulating among listeners around interpretations of the music. They both further speak to social media gatekeeping practices and are examples of broader discourses that emerged on TikTok and other platforms such as Reddit in 2020 when the song "Strawberry Blond" was used in the context of "cottage core" content by mostly white sapphic users. Criticizing these engagements with the song as whitewashing its content (realladymacbeth, 2020), racialized users called for gatekeeping the song, as in the first TikTok's example. The two TikToks bring attention to these discourses, highlighting how seemingly universal representations of sadness and negative emotions can neglect to take specific

experiences and marginalizations into account. While the latter creator argues that people can have their own interpretations of certain songs, they also highlight two songs in particular that should not be diverged from their contexts.

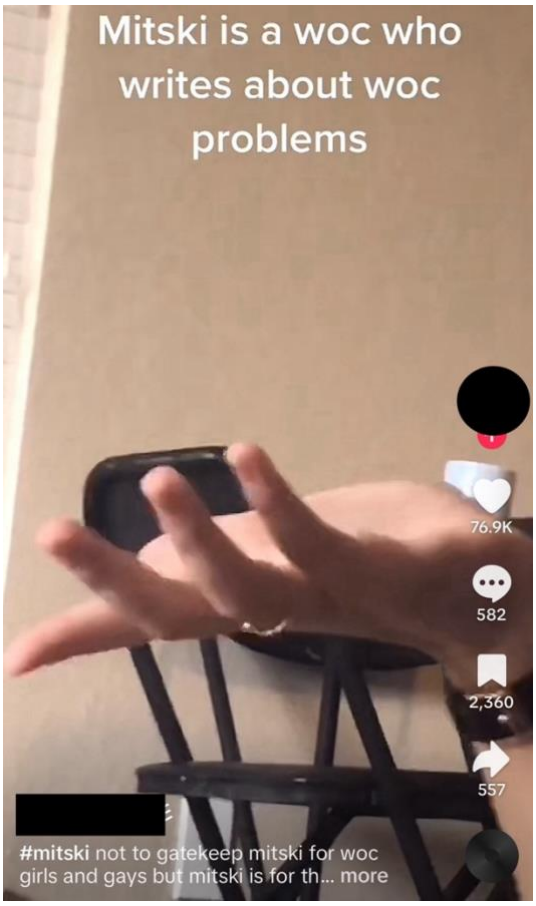

Figure 5-15: "mitski is a woc who writes about woc problems"

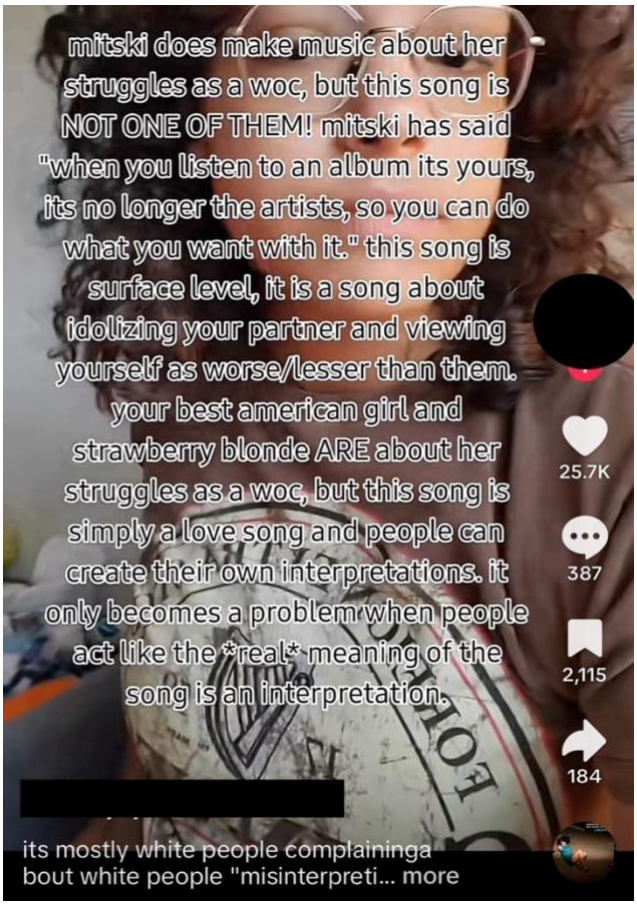

Figure 5-16: "mitski does make music about her struggles as a woc, but this song is NOT ONE OF THEM!"

"Your Best American Girl," the lead single from Mitski's 2016 album *Puberty 2*, is about the feeling of loving someone from a different cultural background and wanting to fit into their life, to become their "best American girl," while knowing that their differences make that impossible (Mitski, 2016). In the song's chorus, Mitski expresses a desire to fit into (white) all-American culture, to shed herself of her own upbringing, despite knowing that it means having to sacrifice pieces of herself for something that will remain unattainable. However, the second line of the chorus, also indicates her coming to accept her identity and upbringing as a woman of colour despite the challenges it poses. "Strawberry Blond" similarly takes the unfulfilled longing for another person as its central metaphor to reflect on her struggles as a woman of colour (Mitski, 2013). She sings "Oh, all I ever wanted was a life in your shape/ So I follow the white lines, follow

the white lines/ Keep my eyes on the road as I ache." Here, the desire for a life in the shape of the strawberry blond "you" and the following of the "white lines" indicate that she wants to fit into a Eurocentric society and appeal to white Western (beauty) standards. While both songs thus express sadness through the form of longing for something unattainable, these emotions are directly tied to the societal context of Mitski's existence as a racialized woman in a Eurocentric society.

Although there has been an increase in discussions around sadness, depression, and mental health within the mainstream in recent years, these discourses often reproduce "the racial disparities underlying the cultural logics of depression more broadly, and its persistent representation as a predominantly white, class-bound affliction" (Holmes, 2023, p. 792). While the vagueness in how intimate publics are conceptualized allows for easy identification and "a collective fantasy of togetherness," it also presents a homogeneity in its conceptualization of sadness that leaves little room for differences, sidelining societal issues, structural inequalities, and oppression, such as matters of race or class (Kanai, 2017, p. 303). Discourses around depression in particular have long been focused on white, middle-class women who are granted vulnerability and fragility that others, especially Black women, are largely denied (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Writing on Billie Eilish and the feminist aesthetics of depression, Jessica Holmes argues that the implicit whiteness of Eilish's image and the cultural privileges it affords play an important part in the visibility and recognition her musical focus on depression receives (Holmes, 2023, p. 791). While none of the representations of sadness in my dataset are actively exclusionary, the focus on relatability can overshadow issues of race into account, thus making them also not actively inclusionary. Considering how sad girl cultures and aesthetics have long been criticized for being largely associated with whiteness, with tumblr in particular often focusing on imagery of white, thin women (Thelandersson, 2023, p. 7), it is thus imperative to recognize the implicit whiteness in many representations of sadness and discourses related to sad girl music on TikTok.

Sadness as Political?

Despite these shortcomings in sad girl music TikTok's representations of sadness, the TikToks can also provide participants with new perspectives and a way to understand their emotions within broader socio-political contexts. The relational aspect of sharing emotions on TikTok allows queer youth to make connections with others and recognize individual sadness not as personal failure, but as shaped by broader structures of oppression. However, considering sad girl music TikToks for the most part do not move into explicitly political expressions, this opens

up the questions of whether this type of engagement falls into what Berlant terms "juxtapolitical" (2008). Berlant argues that, in being centred around certain shared experiences and the desire for generality and recognition, intimate publics exist in proximity to the political but act "as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough" (2008, p. x). This focus on emotional expressions as enough was particularly applicable in what Instagram user and artist Audrey Wollen termed "Sad Girl Theory" within 2010s sad girl cultures. Wollen argued that female sadness is a form of empowerment in its refusal of trying to solve its sadness and thus posited sadness itself as political (Tunnicliffe, 2015). In her view, being a girl in the world is a difficult experience, but girls' sadness is often dismissed or rendered invisible (Barron, 2014). As such, she contends that girls enacting their sadness is an act of resistance, a way of subverting and opposing societal and political structures (Tunnicliffe, 2015). On Instagram, Wollen posted pictures of herself, in her words, "perpetuating [her] own objectification every day" (Wollen cited in Barron, 2014) as a way of drawing attention to the over-sexualization of women. These practices received much criticism due to their re-fetishization and objectification that largely focused on Wollen's white, able-bodied, conventionally attractive body (Holowka, 2018). At the same time, while Wollen's Sad Girl Theory aimed to draw awareness to societal structures as the root cause of girls' suffering, "she does not expand on naming these structures and injustices, not going much further than 'being a girl is (extremely) difficult'" (Poolen, 2024), failing to consider intersectional perspectives that take into account socio-economic factors and racial injustice. While the TikToks in my dataset do not directly posit their rumination on sadness and societal contexts as a form of political action, their representations of sadness and negative emotions can nonetheless be examined in the context of both Wollen's approach to sadness as political and Berlant's conception of the juxtapolitical to consider their political potential.

With the majority of sad girl music TikToks focus on emotions as something that creators are making sense of for themselves and that connects them to others, these expressions largely seem to exist in a juxtapolitical relation since the broader socio-political contexts mostly feature in the background or are hinted at without being made explicit. However, considering the rumination on sadness in relation to Cvetkovich's conceptualization of impasse "as a state of both stuckness and potential, maintaining a hopefulness about the possibility that slowing down or not moving forward might not be a sign of failure and might instead be worth exploring" (2012, p. 21)

provides another perspective on the potential of these expressions of emotions. As the examples featured above have shown, creators on TikTok are making connections between their own sadness and the political structures they exist in, specifically by exploring their own sadness. Despite their sense of disillusionment regarding the future, creators also express a longing for the future. In this way, they reveal a certain hope that continues to exist even within the impasse of sadness and waiting. Here, the sadness does not disappear or turn into something wholly positive, but it allows for the consideration of other ways of moving. Cvetkovich engages with the keyword of creativity, defining it in relation to impasse "as a form of movement, movement that maneuvers the mind inside or around an impasse, even if that movement sometimes seems backward or like a form of retreat" (2012, p. 21). While mainstream mental health discourses often focus on overcoming the inertia of depression, sad girl music TikToks highlight how being stuck in sadness does not have to equal inaction, but can instead create space for understanding that sadness and imagining alternatives. As such, sadness can allow for engagements with societal and political contexts and issues that might then lead to political action and resistance. Thus, although the majority of sad girl music TikToks looked at on their own can be regarded as juxtapolitical, my dataset also reveals how this juxtapolitical relation can be particularly conducive to exposing audiences to political ideas. With politics not being the main focus of the content for the most part, but sad girl music audiences nonetheless being viewed as aligned with leftist political values, the affective attachments people form to the music and the publics forming around it can facilitate engagement with politics in a particularly resonant way due to their being rooted in emotions and these attachments.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, my analysis of sad girl music TikTok has highlighted the different ways in which emotions and sadness in particular function on and move between the individual, the collective, the societal, and the political level. While the examples I have presented in this chapter for the most part focus on one of these levels, they are also interconnected. The thread weaving through these expressions of emotions is a making sense of one's own emotions in relation to these different contexts. As such, the three main takeaways of my analysis are that emotional expressions in sad girl music TikToks surface: 1) the ways in which individuals' identification with emotions in music is a way of understanding and processing their personal emotions; 2) the inherent sociality of sadness and the desire for one's emotions to be recognized;

and, 3) the ways in which queer youth come to understand their individual experiences and sadness not as personal failure but as shaped by broader socio-political contexts which bear the potential for more explicit political consciousness and action. Overarchingly, sad girl music TikToks thus show how engaging with sadness allows queer youth to understand and process their sadness and their disillusionment with the future they are nonetheless continuing to yearn for within a broader context, providing them with a way to connect with others and potentially transform the inertia of waiting into political engagements.

As such, my findings regarding sad girl music TikToks point to the continuity and relevance of youth fan cultures' political potentials. Drawing on anecdotal personal interactions, Tweets by Palestinian user @vivafalastin posted on October 17, 2024, in the context of discourses surrounding the news of One Direction member Liam Payne's death, detail her experiences of introducing other One Direction fans to the Palestinian cause. Quote-tweeting a post by @itsjakeke stating "parasocialism aside, i wouldn't be the person i am today without the community i formed bc of one direction…like it's not even a stretch to say that growing up online as their fan radicalized me in my worldview," she writes "a lot of people are mocking this but i know for a fact that people who followed me for fandom subsequently became radicalized on palestine from me soooo." This is followed by a second tweet that reads, "i don't think it's an exaggeration to say that spaces online where you feel safe and in community with others (no matter how meretricious) are spaces where you're more open to learning from those around you" (@vivafalastin, 2024). This post exemplifies the ways in which the pre-existing relations and affective investments into a shared cultural object can facilitate fans' engagements with politics (Jenkins, 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Particularly for young people who are not yet as politically engaged, "contextualizing politics within popular culture—as is often done on social media—may serve as a shared symbolic resource that can engage youth by speaking to their interests" (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021, p. 3). As such, even when an intimate public such as the one forming around sad girl music is not directly focused on politics but rather operates in proximity to the political, through exposure to political ideas and values in the specific context of sad girl music engagements, audiences can nonetheless come to political consciousness, while also feeling connected to others who share their affective investments in the music and their political views.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Potentialities & Reflections

Throughout this research, I have explored discourses around sad girl music in the platform context to gain a deeper understanding of queer youth's engagements with sad girl music on TikTok and what these can tell us about their approach to music, to emotions, as well as to the broader socio-political contexts they exist in. As I come to the end of writing this thesis in early 2025, the sad girl music landscape looks different from when I actively started my research in early 2023. While 2023 saw the release of boygenius's *the record* and Mitski's *The Land is Inhospitable and So Are We*, in 2024, my TikTok feed was dominated by what some have termed a "lesbian renaissance" in pop music (Balanescu, 2024), and the first month of 2025 brought respective album announcements from boygenius members Lucy Dacus and Julien Baker, both of which seem to go into somewhat different directions than their previous work (Corcoran, 2025; Jibril, 2025).

In the context of these shifts and developments, I now want to return to the research questions introduced in the first chapter, reflect on the research process, and outline the findings of my analysis in order to consider this thesis's contribution to research in social media and popular music, as well as its implications for making sense of the current moment in online music cultures and for possible future research avenues.

This thesis set out to address the following research questions:

1. How is sad girl music conceptualized within the context of the music industry and how are discourses and understandings of it shaped by the platformization of music?
2. How are queer youth engaging with sad girl music on TikTok and in what ways does TikTok facilitate these engagements?
3. What are the emotions, affects, discourses, and concerns present in sad girl music TikToks, how are these expressed, and what do they *do*? How do these discourses, affects, and concerns, and particularly the focus on sadness present in sad girl music TikToks relate to broader societal contexts?

Guided by these questions, I organized my analysis of sad girl music into three chapters that respectively focus on the three overarching areas of platformization, identity and queer fandom practices, and emotions in relation to socio-political contexts. My research reveals how discourses around and engagements with sad girl music as a genre, as a term, and as an object of

fandom are inextricable from both the platform contexts they emerge in, as well as being deeply embedded in and related to the socio-political contexts surrounding them.

The first key insight of this thesis is that discourses and mainstream understandings of sad girl music and its listeners are shaped by an interplay of platform representations and online discourses. Music streaming platforms like Spotify are increasingly impacting perceptions of sad girl music and are (re-)shaping approaches to music consumption by emphasizing it as identity-constructing and mood-specific. In order to provide context for my analysis of sad girl music TikToks, I started out in chapter 3 by looking at sad girl music through the lens of platformization. My case study analysis of the Spotify-generated "sad girl starter pack" playlist illustrates how platformization is impacting the music industry by describing how Spotify's representation of sad girl music shapes how the term is understood within popular discourses. Through their focus on playlists as the dominant organization of music, music streaming services like Spotify are wielding "curatorial power" that influences how music grouped together in such playlists are understood. By describing their playlist as the "sad girl starter pack," invoking the popular format of starter pack memes and adopting internet vernaculars, the platform claims a certain authority over the term sad girl music as a descriptor for a genre of music, while also categorizing both artists and users into specific identity categories. In this way, the platform shapes mainstream understandings and discourses of sad girl music, influencing how listeners engage with it. At the same time, the emphasis on playlists that are thus focused around identity ("sad girl," "sapphic") and emotions ("sad", "yearning"), highlights how music streaming platforms put identity and moods at the centre of music consumption.

Further, my analysis of queer youth's engagements with sad girl music on TikTok highlights queer fandom practices as an important avenue for queer identity formations. Analyzing 222 sad girl music TikToks collected using the platform's sound feature through the lenses of queer theory, platform research and fandom studies, chapter 4 reveals how queer youth make use of TikTok's affordances, mainstream fandom and platform vernacular practices to construct and express their identities and queerness alongside sad girl music. In this context, TikTok's focus on repetition and imitation facilitates co-constructions of collective fan identities that create a sense of relatability and connection, while also delineating sad girl music fandom in ways that can at times be limiting and exclusionary. At the same time, by utilizing common fandom practices, exemplified in depictions of boygenius as a boy band, constructions of identity simultaneously

alongside and against the mainstream can provide an entry to queerness and subvert often heteronormative practices. The centrality of identity constructions to fandom practices on TikTok however also highlights the risk of obsessive fan behaviour where identity is so closely constructed in relation to artists that it becomes toxic and endangers artists' safety.

Approaching the sad girl music TikTok dataset through affect theory, and engaging with the concepts of intimate publics (Berlant, 2008), sociality of pain (Ahmed, 2014), and depression as ordinary (Cvetkovich, 2012), this thesis further provides insight into queer youth's engagements with and expressions of sadness on TikTok. In chapter 5, I show how sadness operates on the different levels of the individual, the communal, the societal, and the political. As such, queer youth's expressions of sadness and negative emotions and engagements with sad girl music on TikTok highlight their desire for understanding their own emotions in the context of a capitalist society that they have difficulty imagining a future in. While a sitting in sadness might at times be regarded as inertia, sad girl music TikToks reveal how this state of sadness might also be a way of holding space for comprehending that sadness in a broader context and for imagining alternatives. In that way, even when not directly engaged in political action, my analysis demonstrates how fandom spaces can provide exposure to political ideas and facilitate engagements with politics precisely because of the pre-existing relations and affective investments into a shared cultural object. Faced with the realities of declining standards of living in much of the Western world, as well as with renewed increases of homophobia and transphobia, queer youth's turn to sad girl music thus indicates a desire for connection.

In summary, these findings highlight the impact of platformization on approaches to music, queer youth's use of fandom and platform practices as tools of identity- and community-formation, and the multi-layered functions of sadness. More broadly, this thesis contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourses in online music cultures, fandom studies, queer studies, as well as discourses around affects, emotions, and mental health. Through the study of queer youth's engagements with sad girl music on TikTok, it provides unique insights into the ways in which emotions and affects function in platformed music fandoms where collective experiences of sadness and shared affective investments can facilitate engagements with politics.

Limitations & Reflection on the Research Process

In reviewing the main conclusions from this thesis, it is important for me to also reflect on the research process and the limitations of this project. The findings I have arrived at are a result

of many choices made along the way that have led the research into certain directions over others, thus privileging certain conclusions over possible others.

Over the two years spent actively working on it, this thesis has taken some shifts in focus, developed in additional directions, and the context around it has changed. First, while my theoretical framework was initially focused on conceptions of happiness in affect theory, I moved a bit away from happiness as the focal affect to instead look more specifically at sadness as it emerged as the central affect in my data. Although this did not require me to change much of the theories and literature I engaged with, it allowed me to consider sadness on its own instead of only in relation to or in opposition to happiness, without right away considering the possibilities for overcoming such sadness as is so often the case particularly in mainstream discourses. At the same time, this shift meant that I did not attend to the earlier question of what their engagements with sad girl music might tell us about how queer youth conceptualize happiness, but instead it allowed me to think more concretely about sadness and what it means to sit with sadness.

Further, in what is probably the most significant deviation taken from my original plan, following suggestions by Dr. Krista Lynes at my thesis proposal defence, I decided to expand on my contextualization of sad girl music by engaging more deeply with the current landscape of the music industry, as well as with sad girl music's relation to previous feminist music movements. While initially intending to incorporate this contextualization into my introductory chapter, I soon realized that, as my exploration of platformization was moving into analysis, it would go beyond the scope of the introduction. As such, I rethought the structure of my thesis and decided to add a third analysis chapter that, guided by an additional research question, would allow me to examine in more detail how the platformization of music shapes sad girl music discourses. By integrating a case study analysis of the "sad girl starter pack" playlist, I was able to uncover how the sad girl music discourses on TikTok are also related to the discourses and representations on music streaming platforms.

I believe these theoretical shifts and the added focus on the platformization of music facilitated a deeper understanding of sad girl music discourses, but they also required me to cut back in some other parts. Due to the limits on what is possible in the frame of a master's thesis, I was not able to attend to sad girl music's relations to previous feminist music movements in as much detail. Similarly, I would have liked to go deeper in my consideration of political economy, particularly in regard to TikTok's platform infrastructure and business model, as well as its

implication in larger political discourses (e.g. the recent developments around its potential ban in the US).

In addition to this reflection on how the methodological and theoretical approaches influenced the research process, I also want to consider how my personal context, in relation to broader socio-political contexts impacted this work. The emotional contexts of the subject matter, alongside the broader socio-political developments between 2023 and 2025, at times made it difficult to not let the research impact my own emotional state or to have my own emotional state impact the research. Particularly as I was analyzing how sadness is represented in sad girl music TikToks and writing chapter 5 in late October and November 2024, while the US was having presidential elections and while the German government collapsed, in addition to the many other things going on in the world, I often found myself wondering how to write critically about representations of emotions in relation to broader socio-political contexts while I myself was experiencing heavy emotions in relation to these contexts. Although I tried to keep my own emotions out of the research process as much as possible, it is inevitable that the end product of the thesis does contain aspects of myself in it. Emotions are not neutral and neither is research. Returning to the methodological considerations about approaching fan studies as both scholar and fan discussed in chapter 1, I do believe that my familiarity with some of the emotions expressed in sad girl music TikToks facilitated my understanding and analysis of them, but it also means that I need to acknowledge that my findings are impacted by these emotions both consciously and unconsciously.

Limitations

As these reflections indicate, there are limitations that come along with the research which, particularly in the time- and resource-bound context of a master's thesis, will never be able to attend to all aspects of a given topic. Despite my best attempts at conducting my data collection in a way that would provide me with an approximation of sad girl music discourses on the platform, it would have been impossible to obtain a dataset that is truly representative of all content engaging with sad girl music in the context of this project.

As such, it is important to acknowledge that my dataset captures one specific window into engagements with sad girl music on TikTok that is shaped by my choice to specifically focus on boygenius and Mitski, the time frame during which I actively collected TikToks, the various factors impacting the algorithm, as well as my own positionalities and the conscious and

unconscious biases guiding my attention and split-second decision-making while scrolling on the platform. Due to my use of personal devices for the data collection, the TikTok algorithm was likely influenced by external inputs such as other apps on my devices or the information deducted from my IP address. In addition, although I would sometimes come across content in German or French (likely due to my phone being set to German and my location in Montreal), I only collected content in English, which, together with my location, led to most of my dataset seemingly being focused on North American content. Further, despite conscious attempts at collecting TikToks from a diversity of creators, the topic of race is not as present in my dataset as topics such as sexuality. As the data collection was carried out only by me and only on one research TikTok account, it is difficult for me to deduce whether this limited representation is due to a lack of representation within sad girl music TikToks more broadly, or whether it is due to the ways in which my own positionality and external factors influenced the algorithm to surface more white creators. Considering some of the TikToks in my dataset mention creators' perceptions of sad girl music as an often-white space, the answer is probably somewhere in the middle; sad girl music TikToks do at times (whether consciously or unconsciously) sideline discussions of race, and the data collection might have surfaced more creators of colour if it had been carried out on multiple accounts by multiple people with different positionalities. Additionally, while I tried to familiarize myself more with literature on how emotions are racialized and the implicit whiteness of many mainstream narratives around sadness and mental health, this is an aspect that could have warranted more attention.

Overarchingly, as my analysis focused on the TikToks in my dataset, my findings are limited to what can be deducted from these. To gain a deeper understanding of queer youth's motivations for engaging with sad girl music on TikTok and how they relate to the music, as well as how artists themselves think about their music and the discourses around it, further research could benefit from conducting interviews with both creators and musicians to incorporate their perspectives more directly, as well as from analyzing discourses on other social media platforms.

Finally, considering TikTok as a platform is constantly in flux, with the interface and features changing, in addition to the broader impacts of the political landscape such as legislation attempting at banning the app in the US and restrictions on it in Canada, TikTok itself presents challenges for research requiring adaptation to these constant changes.

Developments & Potential for Future Research: Sad Girl Music to Lesbian Pop?

As hinted at in the beginning of this chapter, the sad girl music landscape looks somewhat different now than at the time of my data collection. Over the past year, I witnessed a move in queer youth's engagements with music on TikTok shifting from sad girl music that focuses on negative emotions, sadness, and mental health issues, to lesbian pop music more focused on queer joy and rage (cf. Figure 6-1) (Balanescu, 2024; Covington, 2024; Spanos, 2024). While sad emotions and negative affects are not entirely absent from this lesbian pop music, the music takes a different approach to it, providing young queer people with a representation of joyful queerness. Queer joy was already present in the approach boygenius takes especially to their live performances, but in the rise of artists like Chappell Roan, MUNA, Reneé Rapp among others, this queer joy is at the forefront. As Covington writes, "to put it bluntly, the songs are hornier and happier now" (2024), an aspect that is also highlighted in Lucy Dacus's recently released "Ankles," the first single off her forthcoming album.

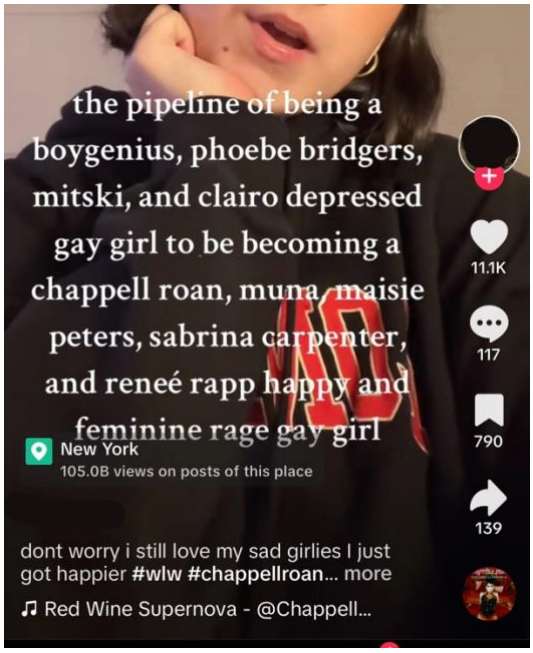

Figure 6-1: "depressed gay girl" to "feminine rage gay girl" pipeline

This development is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Chappell Roan's rapid increase in popularity. An unapologetically lesbian pop musician who has been working for many years and got dropped by her original label in 2020 after the release of her now-hit single "Pink Pony Club" before drawing some of the biggest audiences ever recorded at festivals around North America in 2024, much of her music focuses on growing up queer in the Midwest and queer joy. In "Good

Luck Babe!", her most successful song to date, Roan sings about having to keep a relationship secret due to her ex's struggles with compulsory heterosexuality. As I was back in Germany over the holidays, I heard the song played over the speakers in the grocery store. While not surprised, considering the song's popularity and commercial success in addition to its critical acclaim and fandom, it made me reflect on the increasing visibility of lesbian and queer artists in the mainstream and the potentials of TikTok and fandom practices to highlight these artists and bring them into the mainstream. The potential of a song explicitly about compulsory heterosexuality not only being encountered on TikTok, but being played on the mainstream radio in the grocery store, particularly at a time when queer and trans rights are under direct attack in many places around the world, opens up questions around what this increased focus on lesbian and queer joy, as well as the focus on partying illustrated by "brat summer", means in the current socio-political moment. These shifts thus present potentials for future research on the ways in which emotions and affects in music relate and respond to the political landscape they emerge in, and how this resurgence of lesbian pop relates to previous generations of lesbian music. Further, the last year saw an increase in discourses around artists' perceived influence on politics and their responsibility to speak on political issues. These discourses were particularly fuelled by Charli XCX's post on X declaring "kamala IS brat" (Charli [@charli_xcx], 2024), and Chappell Roan's refusal to endorse a candidate in the US presidential elections (McMenamin, 2024). This attention paid to artists' political expressions highlights the potential for future research on the increased intersection of social media, fan cultures, and politics, and the shifts in celebrity-audience relationships that I briefly touched on in chapter 4.

In conclusion, my analysis of queer youth's sad girl music TikToks opens up various avenues for future research. Its exploration of music, fandom, and affects in the platform context provides insight on queer youth's use of fandom practices for identity constructions and community-formation in relation to emotions and socio-political contexts that can help to make sense of recent developments in music and pop culture. Faced with constant crises and increasing attacks on basic human rights and livelihoods, awareness of how affects and emotions function in online music cultures and pop culture discourses, and how these are mobilized in relation to socio-political contexts, is becoming ever more relevant.

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