PERFORMING SADNESS. A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF "SAD GIRL" MUSIC

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Abstract
This paper aims to examine the "sad girl" music phenomenon, stating that sadness is not just an authentic expression of the self, but a performative and highly commodified affect. While popular artists like Lana Del Rey and Mitski, at first glance, seem to be expressing genuine feelings, this study suggests that their sadness is just a performance, packaged in a marketable product. Using concepts from affect theory, media studies and feminist theory, the research applies Critical Discourse Analysis to examine songs from two artists: Lana Del Rey and Mitski, and to indicate the way sadness sticks to both artists' artistic personas, turning into a desirable aesthetic.

Keywords: sad girl music, performativity, affect theory, femininity, commodification of emotion, social media culture.

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1. Introduction

From Spotify's own "Sad Girl Mix" playlist to TikTok, trends encourage consumers to embrace melancholy, to romanticize sadness, longing, isolation; melancholy has become a cultural and marketable product. In contemporary popular culture, sadness is often aestheticized through different female figures, such as Lana Del Rey and Mitski. They transformed melancholy into a desirable, approachable aesthetic. While mainstream "pop girlies" (Garcia-Novas, 2024), like Beyoncé, Megan Thee Stallion, or Lizzo create a discourse of empowerment, confidence, visibility through their songs, Lana Del Rey, Mitski and other female artists seem to resist this narrative, embracing alienation, longing, fatalism or fragility. On the surface, this looks like a good attempt at subverting the popular postfeminist trope of the successful, confident woman, who does not need anyone to succeed. However, is this resistance authentic, what they express subversive, or has it become another marketable product?

This article examines how certain female artists perform melancholy not just as an expression of the authentic self, but as a gendered affect meant to become viral and consumable, to increase their streaming numbers, ultimately all this becoming, in a sense, performative. The theoretical framework references concepts from different theoreticians that explain how and why gender is performed, why emotions are full

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of attachment, how sadness has been commodified until now within the "sad girl" music phenomenon and how social media platforms are the perfect space for performing sadness. To further demonstrate the thesis, the case study will analyze two artists that are known to be popular within the phenomenon, namely Lana Del Rey and Mitski.

By analyzing American artists, implicitly situating this analysis within the framework of American Studies, the paper aims to interact with questions about gender, media and music in the contemporary U.S. culture. Ultimately, the analysis looks at the way the music industry shapes and circulates emotion-based narratives tied to femininity and how vulnerability can be romanticized, glorified and sold as a desirable product.

Before addressing the theoretical framework, we must understand what "sad girl" music is. A term used in popular culture and academic discourse, "sad girl" music describes a movement of female artists whose art and online persona circulates around melancholy, sadness and emotional vulnerability. Emerging as an antithesis to the female empowerment discourse of 2000s pop music, this phenomenon has been associated with Lana Del Rey, Phoebe Bridgers, Mitski, Billie Eilish and other emerging artists. Furthermore, "sad girl" music popularizes private negative feelings, romanticizing and making them more visible and marketable (Thelandersson, 2023: 133-134).

2. Review of the literature

The topic of gender performativity, the way femininity and emotions are performed has been of great interest within the field of feminist and cultural studies. Judith Butler, in their essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", proposes the idea of gender performativity, the very idea that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988: 519). Thus, gender is not fixed, it is not innate, but simply a set of acts, behaviors, repeated through history, a collective performance that deceives one into thinking performing it within the binary system of male/female is natural, when it actually is the effect of constant repetition as time passed (Butler, 1988: 522). Butler, here, compares the concept of gender to a "theatrical act" or script: one is cast into the role of a man or woman, and by repeating the role they are given they reproduce the illusion of a stable identity and become socially accepted (Butler, 1988: 526). However, just as roles in a theatre play are not chosen by the performer, in a binary-thinking society, gender acts cannot be chosen by a person, because genders are enforced by social norms, and, if performed incorrectly, are "regularly punished" (Butler, 1988: 522). The fact that gender is seen as performative, as just a repetition of already established behaviors can help us understand how different emotions, in our case sadness or

melancholy, when performed by female artists and constantly repeated, can become associated with femininity and the experience of being a woman overall.

Sara Ahmed's affect theory can be connected to the idea of performativity by understanding the "stickiness" of emotions. In "Happy Objects", she argues that "affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (Ahmed, 2010: 29). Feelings are more than what is perceived in a certain situation; they orient people towards specific objects and can even transfer or spread by association: a place, object, experience or person can acquire the quality of the feeling through its association to objects that are already saturated with the said feeling (Ahmed, 2010: 33). As a result, feelings become social practices: their "stickiness" can influence people in their choices, as individuals form social bonds through their shared affective orientations (Ahmed, 2010: 35). Furthermore, affect is social because it not only moves between people but also establishes the rules for belonging in a certain community: inclusion in a group occurs when people share the same feelings for similar interests. If people fail to conform to the affective attachments within that group, they are what Ahmed calls "affect aliens", people who become outsiders because they do not share the collective feelings and are often blamed for producing negative feelings (Ahmed, 2010: 37). Though feelings may appear as ordinary experiences individuals encounter throughout their lives, they are produced through continual repetition within a social context, ultimately perceiving them as performances that individuals carry out, unaware, to adapt to a community's rules and expectations.

As noted, emotions can "stick" to objects, experiences, they do not exclusively belong to individuals, enabling them to shape orientations and perceptions (Ahmed, 2010). Therefore, in analyzing the concept of the "sad girl" aesthetic and music, the "stickiness" of sadness plays a crucial part. In this sense, sadness adheres to sounds, figures, visuals, becoming a social practice, a shared affective orientation. Muchitsch (2024) observes that digital platforms, notably TikTok, have played an important role in amplifying the dissemination of feelings: through features like "original sound" and "duet", individual expressions of melancholy are repeated and aestheticized, creating entire communities based around performing and illustrating sadness. In this context, the "sad girl" aesthetic is continuously sustained through repetition, becoming a recognizable identity that people long to adopt and belong to through its ongoing circulation within media, music and popular culture.

Wang looks at "sad girl" music through the lens of postfeminist culture and the concept of commodification and, through an analysis of music by Lana del Rey and Phoebe Bridgers, recognizes that on a level, artists that belong to the "sad girl" music niche express their vulnerability by making their negative experiences, their trauma, heartbreak and depression fundamental to their music (Wang, n.d.: 4-6). Conversely, their success now depends on the commodification of those negative experiences, turning into cultural capital (Wang, n.d.: 8). This encourages the audience to

aestheticize the women's pain, treating it as consumable, applicable to their lives and further turning it into a performance, missing the song's main message and its critique. Therefore, this pattern creates a greater "trauma culture", in which suffering is acceptable, marketable, superficial, packaged as an aesthetic one buys, streams, or posts about, instead of being addressed and repaired (Wang, n.d.: 9).

3. Methodology

The study's purpose is to show how contemporary female artists perform sadness, focusing on the "sad girl" music phenomenon represented by artists like Lana Del Rey, Mitski and so on. The analysis seeks to demonstrate the ways in which sadness is not just a feeling, but something that is leveraged to increase streams, bring in more followers, becoming a commodified good and performative.

To achieve this, the research employs Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. It views discourse as a complex social event that must be examined on three levels: text, discursive practice and social practice. The textual level analyzes the internal features of the text itself, like vocabulary, grammar or text structure (Fairclough, 1992: 73-75). The level of discursive practice shifts attention to the mechanisms through which the texts are produced, distributed and interpreted by the audience (Fairclough, 1992: 78-79). The last level of analysis is social practice. Fairclough argues that discourse is shaped by society and, at the same time, it contributes to the construction of different social identities or relations. Through the last level, discourse is situated within social and cultural structures (Fairclough, 1992: 86-91).

For the sake of brevity, the model is applied to a corpus of six songs by Lana Del Rey ("Born to Die", "Young and Beautiful", "Summertime Sadness") and Mitski ("Nobody", "Washing Machine Heart", "My Love Mine All Mine"). The songs will be analyzed based on the three levels of Fairclough's model: the textual level, the discursive level and the social level.

As previously stated, the corpus is composed of six songs by Lana Del Rey and Mitski. The criterion of selection is the following: the platform of choice where the songs were picked was YouTube, given that it is a free website and more people can access the content whenever they wish to. Furthermore, the two artists were chosen due to their influence within the subculture: Lana Del Rey is known to be one of the first artists to embody and popularize this aesthetic, glamorizing the experience of being sad and melancholic. On the other hand, Mitski has a different way of expressing sadness, in a more alienated, introspective way, often tying this with her experiences as a woman of different ethnic background exploring her identity and life.

Lastly, an understanding of the two singers is essential before analyzing the songs. Elizabeth Woolridge Grant, known as Lana Del Rey, is a 40-year-old American singer, born in Manhattan, New York. Her first album, "Lana Del Ray A.K.A. Lizzy Grant", was released in 2010. Her music style is generally recognized for her glamorous, Americana-inspired aesthetic, influenced by the 1920-1960 Golden Age of Hollywood. As a celebrity, she is known for her countless controversies and scandals (Hicar and Ostberg, n.d.).

Mitsuki Laycock, known as Mitski Miyawaki, professionally known as Mitski, is a 35-year-old Japanese American singer, born in Mie Prefecture, Japan. Her early life is characterized by constant relocation, due to her father's workplace, living in 13 countries before settling down in the United States for university studies. Her music is inspired by her early life and struggles as ethnically different from those around her which made her feel like an outsider (TeachRock, n.d.).

4. Findings

4.1. The textual level

The first level of analysis is textual, the starting point. Here, the focus is on the text itself, and the goal is to understand how language and literary devices are used to convey the message of the text (Fairclough, 1992: 73-75).

Lana Del Rey's songwriting is based on fatalism, an interminable sadness, being fragile and constantly wanting a dream life with her lover, but to no avail, everything wrapped in rich orchestration that shows grandeur, prompting the listener to romanticize their sadness in an indirect way.

In "Born to Die", Del Rey (2011) takes the role of a woman mourning a lover who died of an overdose, reflecting on love, loss and mortality. The opening lines, "Feet don't fail me now/Take me to the finish line" (Del Rey, 2011: 0:23-0:33) present life as a race toward an inevitable end, a place where everybody ends up, sooner or later, rather than a sum of experiences meant to be lived fully. Her life depends on the idea that, someday, she will reunite with her lover at "the gates" (Del Rey, 2011: 0:39), in the afterlife. The pre-chorus is laced with mourning, melancholy and sensuality. The verses "Don't make me sad, don't make me cry/Sometimes love is not enough/And the road gets tough, I don't know why" (Del Rey, 2011: 1:09-1:20) show the contradictory nature of love, sustaining but ruinous. The way Lana sings the verses, her breathy pauses, mimic exhaustion, the sound of someone trying to keep going despite the road being difficult. The sensual imagery of the verses "Come and take a walk on the wild side/Let me kiss you hard in the pouring rain" (Del Rey, 2011: 1:31-1:37), the image of rain falling, the touches, the movement of the lovers, all of them situate the listener into a space where sadness and pleasure coexist in that

intense, fleeting moment of feeling. The chorus culminates with the verse "Cause you and I, we were born to die" (Del Rey, 2011: 1:50-1:53), with the last part acting as a mantra throughout the song, almost a prophecy for what is about to come, a reminder of the inevitability of death, all of this captured in an E minor instrumental that blends hip-hop percussion with baroque string arrangements, turning the experience into a cinematic montage with a soundtrack that turns sadness and impending doom into grandeur. The grief, once sung, becomes a show, a performance.

"Summertime Sadness" presents the character as yearning for something she knows is unattainable and fleeting, a passionate love in the summertime, the freedom and the vitality this experience of love in the summer offers, while fully knowing it is ephemeral; summer will eventually end, bringing sadness and emptiness in her soul. The character knows her fantasy world will end once summer goes away, she is fully conscious of that, this is why she keeps repeating "summertime sadness" throughout the song. There seems to be a tension between the carefree nature of summer, the long days, the fun nights, where she can wear her red dress, dance in the shadow of the "pale moonlight" (Del Rey, 2013: 0:40), and the somberness of sadness, it is like she cannot fully indulge in the freedom summer offers her because of that nagging thought that everything will end eventually and sadness will once again engulf her being. However, she chooses to dissociate, declaring that "Honey, I'm on fire, I feel it everywhere/Nothin' scares me anymore" (Del Rey, 2013: 1:00-1:07), she is reckless, she is "feelin' electric tonight/Cruisin' down the coast, goin' 'bout 99" (Del Rey, 2013: 1:43-1:50), she likes the intoxicating freedom, the feeling of being young and in love. The repetition of "summertime sadness" acts as a reminder, a feeling of impending doom; even though she dissociates, she keeps coming back to her unresolved feelings, knowing that there is no place like home, in the arms of the sadness, almost acting like a lifestyle accessory, a mood she can possess and come back to. After all, her dissociation is something driven by sadness, looking at it not as sorrow or something she can resolve in the future, but as something exhilarating. Once again, the tempo and the orchestration of the song make it become danceable, aestheticizing the feeling of melancholy and turning it into something upbeat, that can be romanticized and that can be experienced cinematically by the listener. Sadness here becomes an aesthetic that is to be desired by the listener and performed, even though they do not exclusively feel that way.

In "Young and Beautiful", the source of sadness is the constant fear of the main character losing her lover as her youth fades, indicated by the question "Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?" (Del Rey, 2013: 0:50-0:57). The woman is anxious, torn up by the thought that she is valued because of her physical beauty that will fade as time passes. Eventually, she comes to her senses, the verse "I know you will, I know you will, I know that you will" (Del Rey, 2013: 1:05-1:13) offers a sense of assurance that fades again, doubting her lover's loyalty, once again trapped by her anxious thoughts of abandonment once her beauty fades.

Throughout the song, the character recalls a love story, a passionate relationship with her lover, looking back at wild, electric nights with them, where they allowed themselves to experience everything ("Hot summer nights mid-July/When you and I were forever wild/The crazy days, the city lights/The way you'd play with me like a child" [Del Rey, 2013: 0:32-0:48]). She adores her lover ("All that grace, all that body/All that face makes me wanna party" [Del Rey, 2013: 2:45-2:53]), perceiving them as a divine figure, her "sun" (Del Rey, 2013: 2:54), she cannot live her life without them, the one that makes her "shine like diamonds" (Del Rey, 2013: 2:55-3:00). She also imagines a future in the afterlife, where she has to beg for a reunion with her lover, without whom she cannot live. She worships her lover, and within that devotion and adoration, she begins to have doubts; how can her "sun" love her when her beauty fades? This exact emotional worship, obsession and romantic adoration is the source of her sadness, the negative thoughts and the negative discourse she has about herself in the chorus.

Once again, the performance of the song is the one that prompts the listener to be drawn to the idea of idealizing sadness. Del Rey turns the song into a theatrical performance; through the way she intonates the lyrics. The desperation and desire in her voice when she sings "I know you will" transforms a simple reassurance into a performance where she must show the need and the tension. Sadness becomes an object of desire due to the soundtrack, paired with the breathy voice of the singer: the strings and piano create a movie-like atmosphere, transforming sadness into something splendid, to be desired by the listener. The vulnerability, anxiety and melancholy expressed in the verses of the song are now elevated into something majestic, romanticized and aestheticized, proving that anything can be packed up into a desirable product, regardless of that feeling being negative or positive.

As opposed to this, Mitski's style of writing and performance is more distinct than Del Rey's. While Del Rey creates cinematic, dreamy-like music with lyrics sung in a breathy voice that give the songs an ethereal effect, which might prompt the listener to romanticize their life, immersing them in that exact moment, Mitski has a simpler way of approaching a song, a more minimalist approach that emphasizes the feeling of being uncomfortable, anxious, longing for something, for love, performed by a clear, sometimes tense voice, that expresses vulnerability and simplicity rather than glamor and show.

"Nobody" presents sadness in an obsessive way, the same word appearing in the song for over 30 times. The character feels useless without her lover, without "someone to kiss" (Mitski, 2018: 1:00), she feels so lonely, alienated and empty, fully conscious that nobody wants her, giving up on the thought that, maybe one day, she will meet her significant other and have a life surrounded by people she loves. The repetition of "nobody" in the chorus becomes the center of attention, it is like her whole world spins around the anxiety, absence and isolation she constantly feels, while also dramatizing these feelings. She has done everything there could have been

done to have someone by her side, she has been "big and small and big and small and big and small again" (Mitski, 2018: 1:33-1:39), changing her appearance, style, behavior in an attempt to be seen and admired, yet still feeling unseen and unloved. The character forms her identity around the idea of being alone, being unwanted and unlovable, she cannot see beyond these feelings. Mitski's delivery is like a wave of anxiety that washes her throughout the whole song, especially during the chorus, where her voice gradually rises in intensity, almost like heightening the emotional tension. Mitski packages sadness and melancholy in an upbeat, disco-like instrumental, a danceable rhythm that makes you forget the main idea of the song, creating a sharp contrast between the rhythm and the lyrics, remaining lively while the words express agony and despair.

In "Washing Machine Heart", the main character offers herself fully to her love interest, willing to be emotionally harmed and dehumanized, all in the name of desperation, love and obsession. The opening lyric, "Toss your dirty shoes in my washing machine heart" (Mitski, 2018: 0:07-0:12) contains the metaphor "washing machine heart", which symbolizes the self-sacrifice the character is willing to take up in order to be loved by her significant other, she is willing to present her heart as a washing machine to clean her significant other's "dirty shoes", living with the delusion that she can fix their issues, she thinks her emotional labor will save the relationship. In her attempt to save the relationship, just as the dirty shoes "bang it up inside" (Mitski, 2018: 0:12-0:15) the washing machine, provoking harm to the insides of the appliance, the narrator feels pain, her own heart is taking the damage. She keeps growing impatient, she wants her significant other to kiss her, to show their affection, but that does not happen, and even though love is unattainable, she still clings to the role of the caretaker, hoping that one day, her significant other will love her. As the song progresses, both the narrator and her significant other are going through the denial phase. The narrator actively chooses denial as a coping mechanism, she does not want to see her lover's flaws, affecting her emotionally, and so does her significant other. They do not love the narrator but keep holding onto the false pretense that she is the person they truly love and want. The relationship will not go on for much longer, the performance cannot be sustained forever, and the last part of the song offers an insight into the way the narrator confronts her feelings: "Why not me?" (Mitski, 2018: 1:13-1:17). She knows this relationship will soon end and chooses to address her emotional dependence and all the issues surrounding the toxicity of the relationship.

"My Love Mine all Mine" is a monologue; the narrator is talking to the moon, asking it to capture her love and shine it down to Earth, once she dies. The moon, portrayed here as a "hole of light" (Mitski, 2023: 0:42), is the main source of light in the darkness of the night, just as the narrator's love is the one thing that keeps her going through dark times, the sole feeling she can cling to when chaos unleashes. Nothing belongs to her in this life, besides her love, her personal feelings; that is her legacy: "'Cause my love is mine, all mine/I love, my, my, mine/Nothing in the world belongs

to me/But my love, mine, all mine, all mine" (Mitski, 2023: 1:13-1:32). The second verse introduces a new character: her lover; they showed her how love should look like, and, as a lesson she wants to teach, she asks the moon to "shine it down" (Mitski, 2023: 2:02-2:04). Sadness and melancholy here are performed through Mitski's delivery of the song, the minimization of the instrumental and the essence of the lyrics. Mitski's low vocal register, paired with a dreamy instrumental that does not fit within the common 12 keys, somewhere between A and A flat major, and the acknowledgement that life is ephemeral, turns melancholy and sadness into an aesthetic that can be performed by the listener whenever they listen to the song.

4.2. Discursive practice

The second level of analysis is the discursive practice, the purpose of which is to look at how the text is distributed, consumed and for whom the text is created (Fairclough, 1992: 78-79). Lana Del Rey and Mitski are popular among teens and young women who often create fan communities around the listening experience on multiple social media platforms (Alves, 2023; Sessoms, 2024) and what should be a private, personal emotional experience, turns into a shared affect. What brings fans together is the way they relate to the lyrics and their performance, and ultimately the essence of the songs: the need for women to remain desirable, youthful, available and sensible in order to be socially acceptable and validated by people. In this case, to please the fans and remain relevant for the way they relate to the struggles of being a woman in modern society, both artists choose to perform sadness, to create music that acts out vulnerability, alienation and longing, a gendered performance that becomes socially visible. Instead of being genuine, the artists need to perform sadness as a strategy of recognition, to be marketable and relatable, to attract more fans.

By analyzing lyrics from popular songs performed by Lana Del Rey and Mitski, we observed a few differences regarding the way they perform sadness, the feminine sadness immortalized in two instances; Del Rey's nostalgic, dreamy femininity, the *femme fragile*, often found thinking about her failed relationships, death and being afraid of aging, becoming undesirable and Mitski's theatrical vulnerability, dehumanization and alienation, her constant anxiety, everything captured in a raw, almost authentic way. Therefore, sadness sticks to their artistic identities, they cannot express femininity without performing sadness and melancholy, the characteristic that makes them vulnerable, and thus, desirable. According to Butler, every gender has to perform in order to be socially acceptable, and this is the way Del Rey and Mitski's artistic identities become socially acceptable – by performing the very thing that made them famous.

Lana Del Rey's expression of sadness is popular on multiple social media platforms. First of all, the music videos that accompany the lyrics previously analyzed have certain elements in common: they are dreamy, evoke nostalgia, and appear as though

shot on a vintage film camera, which, along with the instrumental, create a space where the listeners can romanticize their life, can immerse in the experience and adapt it to fit within their daily lives. Spotify playlists also contribute to the dissemination of performative sadness; playlists like "my life is a movie" (Spotify, n.d.), "sad girl starter pack" (Spotify, n.d.) or "sad hour" (Spotify, n.d.) often choose Del Rey's most popular songs, packages it into a relatable playlist and makes nostalgia easier to consume and share everywhere. Furthermore, TikTok is seen as a space where music and trends can gain popularity easily, and Lana Del Rey's music is no stranger. Fans usually create Lana Del Rey edits from her music videos, talk about the importance of her music, make dance videos and film themselves relating to her songs. All these ways of consumption allow the audience to perform her artistic identity while internalizing her feelings, using them to perform sadness daily, transforming it into an aesthetic rather than acknowledging the real issues that sit behind the music and addressing them.

However, the damsel in distress, the longing woman, the melancholic who desperately wants to be loved is not identical to the artist. Separating art from the artist will reveal a troubled woman who has faced along her career several criticisms and controversies. Us Weekly (Nardino, 2023) documents times where she was accused of cultural appropriation in her music videos, glamorizing abuse, engaging in scandals with other celebrities and overall being an ignorant person, when in 2020, mid-pandemic, she was seen wearing a mesh mask during a book signing event, hosted by her. Lana Del Rey does not perform her authentic self; she puts on a mask; the sad, sensible woman is just a performance, a carefully aestheticized persona used to gain fans and revenue.

Mitski, compared to Lana Del Rey, chooses a different way to express sadness. Her expression is more theatrical and desperate; the music videos are less dreamy and more unsettling. She constantly finds herself in tight, inescapable spaces that induce the idea of a person losing their sanity, being so out of touch with reality and wanting to be loved by someone that they lose themselves in the process. The music videos, paired with lyrics that most of the time are repetitive and upbeat instrumentals that match the anxiety provoked by the constant repetition of words, create a compelling image that attracts masses. Thus, Mitski's approach to sadness becomes relatable for teenagers and young adults that face pressure every day, the pressure to fit within a group of people, to have a significant other when everybody has someone, the pressure to express their gender in a socially acceptable way. They appropriate Mitski's expression of sadness and make it their own, they start to perform it. On TikTok, her fans use the songs as a background to express different feelings: sadness, hopelessness, despair and overall negative thoughts, her lyrics becoming relatable for their own experiences. In 2023, suddenly, the chorus of "Nobody" became a trend in which people ran away from the camera, as if they were escaping from an unseen threat, moving in an exaggerated, comedic way. Mitski's fans adapt her lyrics to their own experiences, making the act of listening to her songs deeply personal.

Furthermore, Spotify adds Mitski's songs in the same playlists as Lana Del Rey's, further portraying melancholy and sadness as a consumable good, ready to be listened to anytime.

Even if Mitski's artistic persona and art seem legitimate, natural, coming from a place of real sadness, longing and anxiety, her music is performative because of the theatrical element. The exaggeration of feelings makes everything look performative; the way she repeats certain words, she chooses to express her feelings in music videos, she sings certain lyrics, everything is part of a performance which aims to bring in revenue, to stir listeners up, to want them to make her songs the soundtrack of their day. Even though the experiences she sings about are not fictional, growing up in a nomadic family, living in several countries, feeling like she does not belong anywhere, before settling in the United States, and even there feeling like an outsider due to her ethnicity, she structures every part of her music as a marketable good, destined for public consumption. She is an actress, starring in a movie of which she is the director and she knows how to set the scene, inviting people to witness and internalize the sadness she expresses.

4.3. Socio-cultural practice

The last level of analysis is socio-cultural practice. It analyzes the way the text contributes to the social and cultural reality and the way it is shaped by this reality (Fairclough, 1992: 86-91). Music, as an omnipresent form of art, can shape values, opinions and behaviors (Rehfeldt et al., 2021). The analysis of the songs brings to light a few aspects.

First, sadness becomes a social behavior. Songs are created based on the preferences of the consumers; they are mainly shaped by what fans want to feel. The demand sustains the production of melancholy and its performativity. The "sad girl" music trend thrives because of the demand of fans; it allows listeners to perform sadness as a lifestyle; it allows artists to write music and become popular. Sadness also becomes marketable through streaming platforms that create official playlists based on this feeling that become popular, streamed by fans throughout their days, becoming their daily soundtracks. Thus, sadness becomes performative because most of the time, it is not truly felt; it is just an expression of oneself in society; it is something marketable, used to gain fans, revenue and popularity.

Furthermore, what begins as a personal, intimate affect becomes a public performance. Instead of truly experiencing melancholy, sadness, longing, people choose to gain popularity by performing it on social media platforms like TikTok. Videos posted on this platform are strategically made to attract views, likes, reposts and followers, by using sounds and trends that are popular at that moment. Users reproduce sadness not as a true, personally relatable feeling, but as an aesthetic, romanticizing it, glamorizing it, for the algorithm. It becomes stylized to appear as

something beautiful, something desirable; you would want to perform sadness because you saw how beautiful it can become, but in reality, this type of content is just something that is highly modified in order to be consumable, because, generally, people do not want the raw experience, they want something out of the ordinary. In doing so, sadness loses its introspection, its ability to make one reflect on their current state, and it becomes a collective performance, standardized and commercialized.

Lastly, Lana Del Rey and Mitski's songs are complex forms of art that have the ability to shape a society's expectations of the subjects that are addressed in the songs. In this situation, the subject in question is the way femininity is supposed to be performed in order to be socially acceptable. By interacting with these songs and their themes, the listener will tend to create a set of beliefs referring to how a desirable woman should look, one that is sad, melancholic, and embodies the archetype of the *femme fragile*. A listener who identifies as a female will appropriate these values and replicate them as a performance, even though they might not relate to the lyrics, but trying to internalize them in order to perform femininity and sadness as a socially recognized action.

The need for performing sadness is largely tied to the Western culture, particularly the American entertainment industry, which tends to associate femininity with youth, beauty, attractive physical traits and their emotional vulnerability (Mckay et al., 2018). Mitski and Lana Del Rey talk about this in their music. They both are afraid to lose their beauty, because, if they do, they will become unattractive and men would not want them; their wish is to be seen by people, especially men, and when that does not happen, it is like their whole world crashes down. They either isolate and think about death or lose themselves trying to satisfy someone that does not want them. Here, their sadness becomes performative because their emotional vulnerability is seen as something beautiful, pain makes women beautiful, more approachable, more sensible. As a result, the two artists, along with their fans, participate in a performance of gender, which is shaped by social standards of performing feminine sadness.

5. Conclusion

The "sad girl" music phenomenon proves to be a successful example of the way affect becomes commodified and the examples discussed above show the extent to which artists go to be successful. The analysis of songs written by Lana Del Rey and Mitski and their distinct aesthetics reveal how sadness becomes profitable, how one can package feelings that are not so desirable into marketable products, desirable and heavily consumed by masses, and ultimately performed as a social behavior.

The phenomenon of "sad girl" music reflects a side of the entertainment industry that commodifies even the most intimate aspect of a person's life, their emotional

side, their feelings, creating products out of them. Normally, adverse feelings should not be something one would want to adopt in their daily lives, but seeing that it has become popularized, promoted as an admired cultural practice, it might compel the person to embrace this aesthetic. Pain, melancholy and vulnerability become a brand, desirable for a person to be socially acceptable, especially when talking about performing feminine sadness, which is linked to fragility, alienation and emotional turmoil, based on the way female artists present sadness.

Therefore, the "sad girl" music aesthetic should not be seen as entirely inauthentic, but neither should it be treated as a transparent expression of a personal emotion. Even though the songs are influenced by personal experiences, the feelings are shaped through artistic and cultural expectations. Thus, sadness becomes performative because it is presented through repeated forms of female vulnerability. This does not mean emotion is fake, but that it is expressed through socially recognizable patterns that construct identity.

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