How Women with Borderline Personality Disorder Navigate Postfeminist Conditions

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Abstract

This thesis examines the gendered media self-representations of young women with Borderline Personality Disorder in the context of postfeminist and neoliberal digital cultures. Advocating for the media practices of girls and young women to be read in new ways by feminist scholars of media and culture, as opposed to previous practices of reading this content as "problematic," it attempts to put such an approach to practice. It takes an extensive look at the content of three accounts on the social media platform of Instagram (@bpdfairyprincess, backfromtheborderline, and m3lody0nmars), with a focus on memes. This research critically investigates the many unique and contradictory pressures placed upon young women in contemporary digital mediascapes. Using the notion of a postfeminist sensibility as an analytical approach, this research emphasizes upon the entanglement of postfeminist and neoliberal ideals in these cultures. To look at the production of BPD content as a *gendered* media practice of self-representation, "Sad Girls" are linked to borderline women. Some essential historical and feminist contexts are provided to construct BPD as a gendered condition, and how it can provide unique insight into the experience of living and performing "appropriate" and ideal femininities in postfeminist digital cultures. The methodology is comprised of a textual analysis and theoretical sampling influenced by a grounded theory approach. By looking at aspects such as how notions of "weak" femininities are made subversive, the extensive analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how young women navigate and "get by" in postfeminist conditions using self-representational content as a cultural mode of survival.

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Introduction

At the age of 19, I was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Before my diagnosis, I had never heard of this condition and having been a keen student of psychology for many years, my lack of familiarity with BPD was particularly unsettling. Attempting to educate myself through Internet browsing raised more questions than answers due to confusing descriptions and varying perspectives.[1] Typically, however, BPD is conceptualized as intense instabilities in affect, mood, and relationships, and is marked by disturbances in identity or self-image, chronic feelings of emptiness, an intense fear of abandonment, turbulent interpersonal relationships, impulsivity, and self-harming behaviors.[2] Highly stigmatized in both the medical field and in media representations, this is illustrated by how despite common medical practice is to humanize patients by using language such as "a person with schizophrenia" instead of "schizophrenic," those with BPD are often referred to as "borderlines."[3]

Today, virtually everything I know about BPD four years after being diagnosed comes from content on social media platforms such as Instagram. Using the #bpd hashtag, I ignored Instagram's suggestion that I get help and overrode the platform's censorship to discover a complex, self-aware, funny, and emotionally charged community. Memes, informative threads for support and awareness, "sad girl" Tumblr content from the 2010s, and edited images of *Hello Kitty* filled my 'for you' page.

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[1] Johns Hopkins Medicine, "Borderline Personality Disorder," February 1, 2023, accessed February 24, 2024, https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/borderline-personality-disorder. It is important to note that while similar and often conflated with one another, BPD and bipolar disorder are individual conditions that fall under separate diagnostic categories. Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder as opposed to a personality disorder, and the mood swings occur over weeks or months. Mood swings associated with BPD occur in days or even hours and seconds. Diagnoses of bipolar disorder are also more evenly distributed among genders compared to BPD which is female-predominant.

[2] Bria Berger, "Power, Selfhood, and Identity: A Feminist Critique of Borderline Personality Disorder," *Advocates' Forum, 2014*, 2014, 1.

[3] Jonathan Foiles, "Gender, Stigma, and Bias: Everything We Get Wrong About Borderline Personality Disorder," Literary Hub, September 3, 2021, accessed May 2, 2024, https://lithub.com/gender-stigma-and-bias-everything-we-get-wrong-about-borderline-personality-disorder/.

The content circulated by this community falls under a visual aesthetic heavily saturated with popular culture references and figures such as Paris Hilton from 2000s girl culture, ironically used to depict sadness, suffering, and themes of childhood trauma, sexual abuse, nihilism, and suicidal ideation. There was a huge contrast with the academic sources I had been consuming and had found to be inaccessible and seldom relatable due to excessive use of medical jargon. By engaging with this content, I began to realize that BPD is an extremely gendered diagnosis; moreover, its gendering is what makes understanding it difficult, and having it agonizing. I am intrigued by the idea that engaging with BPD content can be a way of coping and making sense of borderline experiences and identities, and interested in uncovering the insights it can provide into the process of navigating life as a young borderline woman in contemporary digital landscapes.

Over 75% of individuals diagnosed with BPD are women[4] and feminist frameworks place BPD's diagnostic inequities within a wider political and medical context of men having glaringly outnumbered women in medicine for a long time.[5] Feminist perspectives of BPD have theorized that women with intense emotional instability "are labeled as such in response to gendered power relations rather than a pathology that is endogenous to women."[6] Hence, while Instagram's message may seem like a helpful safety measure put in place to "protect" users from "content that may encourage behavior that can cause harm and even lead to death,"[7] it is indicative of how those with the condition—a majority of whom are women—are stigmatized and often labelled as "dangerous" and "risky" not just in the medical field but in media and scholarship.

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[4] Xinyu Qin et al., "Sex Differences in Borderline Personality Disorder: A Scoping Review," *PLOS ONE* 17, no. 12 (December 30, 2022): e0279015, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0279015.

[5] Arthur Lazarus, "Psychiatry and Sexism: Gender Bias in BPD Diagnosis?," *MedPage Today*, November 30, 2021, accessed May 4, 2024, https://www.medpagetoday.com/popmedicine/popmedicine/95936.

[6] Lazarus, "Psychiatry and Sexism: Gender Bias in BPD Diagnosis?"

[7] Renee Fabian, "BPD Community Tells Instagram to 'Stop Silencing Us,'" The Mighty, May 8, 2023, accessed May 4, 2024, https://themighty.com/topic/borderline-personality-disorder/bpd-instagram-hashtag-ban/.

In the book *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*, author Amy Shields Dobson writes that cultural commentary about the digital media practices of girls and young women tends to construct such labels and shortcomings as an inherent weakness of their sex. This commentary either fuels moral panic concerning their well-being and safety or "mocks their interests and abilities in cultural production."[8] Dobson raises the critical question of whether the media self-representations of young women framed as risky, sexualized, pathological, gender-typical, or controversial and politically contested in other ways,[9] have any implications for discussions about how power and influence operate in media, and how popular culture shapes gender and other identities. Using a Foucauldian feminist line of thinking drawn from Rosalind Gill and other feminist scholars, Dobson questions whether such mediated self-representation indicates the "narrow regulation and disciplining of female bodies and feminine gender identities,"[10] and what decoding it can reveal about the modern-day living of young femininity. Her work advocates for an approach following the idea that seemingly stereotypical and sexist self-representations of women both can and should be read in new ways by feminist scholars of media and culture, due to their "framing with new, 'participatory,' 'interactive,' and 'demotic' digital media cultures, 'self-produced' by girls and young women."[11]

Taking inspiration from Dobson's approach, this research examine BPD content on Instagram as a gendered media practice of self-representation in postfeminist and neoliberal digital cultures. Additionally, I approach this content as gendered conversations about mental illness in particular. At a moment in contemporary culture that has been argued as being distinctly postfeminist and

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[8] Amy Shields Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*, eBook, 1st ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137404206.

[9] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation, 3.

[10] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 3.

[11] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 4.

neoliberal in many places,[12] it is important to interrogate how gender is represented, experienced, and lived. This approach does not conform to practices of viewing such media production as evidence of the sexualization and poor mental health of girls.[13] Further, I do not seek to survey this online practice to "help" or "protect" this community of borderline users. Instead, I intend to underscore the nuanced complexities, points of tension, and movement and dissolution of power in media and the production of gendered subjectivity in postfeminist digital cultures.[14]

Therefore, I put forth the following question: *What can self-representational BPD content, that is produced by young borderline women, reveal about the complex process of navigating postfeminist conditions, and how?* I additionally seek answers to the following subquestions: *How are postfeminist digital cultures complicated by neoliberal ideals, and what pressures, difficulties, and contradictions do borderline women have to navigate? How are experiences of suffering and sadness spoken about in gendered ways and how do they respond, negotiate, or subvert contemporary ideals of femininity?* By attempting to answer these questions, I hope to unearth how borderlines embody the existential tensions that arise from being "trapped inside the affective confines of postfeminism,"[15] how BPD content embodies both a doing and undoing of feminism,[16] and how this contradiction can inform a vital understanding of coping with or "getting by" in postfeminist conditions.[17]

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[12] Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, "Introduction," eBook, in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, 1st ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230294523.

[13] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 5.

[14] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 3.

[15] Marni Appleton, "'Stuckness' and the Fraying Promise of Postfeminism in Contemporary Women's Short Stories," *Contemporary Women's Writing*, January 18, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpad025.

[16] Gill and Scharff, "Introduction," 1.

[17] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 5.

In the proceeding section of this paper, I first discuss relevant feminist works on postfeminism and existing studies of BPD content on social media. Beginning with Rosalind Gill's notion of a postfeminist sensibility, I emphasize the influence of neoliberalism in postfeminist digital cultures and the concept of "new femininities." Next, I historicize BPD to help frame BPD content as a gendered media practice of self-representations, and I link borderline women to Sad Girls to help look at gendered portrayals of sadness, suffering, and mental illness on social media in specific. I then look at the role of humor and importance of portraying authenticity in visibilizing borderline experiences on social media, and how notions of "weak" femininities can be subversive by helping borderline women cope with or "get by" in postfeminist conditions. The methodology section details the use of theoretical sampling for data collection and textual analysis for examining borderline self-representations from three Instagram accounts producing BPD content; @m3lody0nmars, @bpdfairprincess, and @backfromtheborderline.

Theoretical Framework

I. Postfeminist Sensibility, New Femininities, and Neoliberalism

To combat the lack of consensus surrounding the definition of postfeminism, Gill offers the concept of a postfeminist sensibility as a means of empirically analyzing popular culture to understand what is "distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media."[18] Rather than positioning postfeminism either as a theoretical orientation, a new moment in feminism, or a backlash against feminism, BPD content on Instagram can be investigated as a postfeminist critical object in a way that emphasizes the "entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas"[19] within the images, ideas,

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[18] Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 1, 2007): 147–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898.

[19] Gill and Scharff, "Introduction," 4.

and meanings being circulated. To emphasize that feminine subjectivities dissolve, evolve, and emerge in contemporary postfeminist mediascapes, I also utilize the notion of "new femininities" Gill and Christina Scharff introduce in their book *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity,* to allow for critical engagement with how gender is lived and portrayed in media.[20]

Gill outlines several interrelated themes that constitute a postfeminist sensibility: femininity being conceived as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; a focus on self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline; a privileging of empowerment, individualism, and choice; the pronouncement of a 'makeover paradigm'; a resexualization of female bodies; and an emphasis on consumerism and commodification of individual differences.[21]

Gill and Scharff state that the parallels between postfeminism and neoliberalism suggest that postfeminism does not simply respond to feminism but is "a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas."[22] Gill argues that postfeminism and neoliberalism are significantly intertwined in three important ways. First, both are structured by cultures of individualism that place the burden of responsibility entirely on the individual. Second, the self-governing, self-regulating, and independent neoliberal subject strongly resembles the active, freely-choosing, and self-reinventing postfeminist subject. Third, which Gill says may be the most important, is that it is always women on whom these complex conditions and pressures are placed.[23] It is mostly women who are required to self-reinvent, self-govern, self-regulate, and present their actions as confident and freely-chosen. This suggests that neoliberalism may *always*

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[20] Gill and Scharff, "Introduction," 2.

[21] Gill and Scharff, "Introduction," 4.

[22] Gill and Scharff, "Introduction," 7.

[23] Gill and Scharff, "Introduction," 7.

already be gendered and women have been constructed as the ideal neoliberal subject in modern society.[24]

II. Sad Girls and Gendered Self-Representations

Before proceeding, it is important to bring some conceptual clarity to the term "self-representation." Dobson draws upon the work of Nancy Thumin who uses the term to differentiate between conventional ideas of self-presentation and performance, and the "conscious, mediated representations of selves that can be found on social media."[25] Additionally, Dobson uses this concept to specifically focus on practices and representations that get regarded as "problematic," such as sexualized self-representations, "confident" feminine selves, and portrayals of pain and suffering.[26] Such self-representations can be considered a "genre"—an implicit understanding or contractual agreement between producers of culture and audiences—that are "centered on conveying notions of authenticity."[27]

In the book *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture*, author Frederika Thelandersson addresses questions such as what the discourse surrounding mental health looks like in female-dominated media spaces.[28] Concerned with the gendered consequences of neoliberalism in relation to mental health, she studies the entanglement of popular feminism and emotions and her work contributes to the field of feminist media studies.[29] Drawing from conceptualizations of women as model neoliberal subjects, and the works of

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[24] Gill and Scharff, "Introduction," 7.

[25] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 9.

[26] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 2.

[27] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 10.

[28] Fredrika Thelandersson. 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture. eBook. 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 6, doi:10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0_5.

[29] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 6.

postfeminist scholars such as Gill, Thelandersson looks at Sad Girl Culture as a modern iteration of mental illness in relation to gender. By examining this culture and sad girl content, she charts the shift in the popular media landscape; from an "upbeat affective register to one that has space for some talk of negative and downtrodden feelings."[30]

Found on Tumblr and Instagram, the "sad girl" figure was used in the 2010s to speak about mental illness online in gendered ways and can be understood as "a young woman who is unashamed of her emotional life and who fearlessly acts out her pain for others to see."[31] It is a distinct aesthetic and gendered media practice of self-representation to visibilize the mental health struggles (usually anxiety and depression) of girls and young women. Thelandersson argues that the modern sad girl in popular culture has evolved from various configurations of the sad and mad woman across time and space, such as "the Victorian madwoman, the hysteric, the schizophrenic, and the Prozac-consuming American woman of the 1990s."[32] She historicizes how women's sadness has been pathologized under various diagnostic labels across time and has led to marginalization through stigma, institutionalization, confinement, and alienation.[33] Feminist scholars have argued that definitions of gendered mental illnesses are tied to and thus change in accordance with what the contemporary conventions of gender are, and deviations to these norms are pathologized under reconfigured labels. Thelandersson suggests that the outwardly visible symptoms considered as affirmations of the "reality" of a specific condition such as hysteria can be understood as examples for how "the social (language-based and discursive) impacts us at the level of our biological responses." She adds that rather than being absolute social and linguistic constructs or confirmed

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[30] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 2.

[31] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 157.

[32] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 33.

[33] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 55.

neurological truths, such labels are socio-temporal; they involve complex interplays between sociocultural contexts and the constantly evolving medical field.[34]

BPD is an ideal example for supporting Thelandersson's argument because it is widely considered the modern archetype of the hysteric, mad, and sad Victorian woman in the 21st century. In the book *Women and Borderline Personality Disorder: Symptoms and Stories*, author Janet Wirth-Cauchon suggests the "borderline" label functions today the way that the "hysteria" label did for women in late 19th and early 20th centuries; both conditions "delimit appropriate behavior for women"[35] and have stereotypically feminine diagnostic criteria. Conceptualizations of borderline identities in clinical and media settings pathologize "traits associated with both conventional femininity, such as emotionality, dependency, and self-destructiveness, and unconventional femininity, such as rebelliousness and sexual promiscuity."[36] It has been pointed out that the key distinguishing factor of BPD from hysteria is the inclusion of anger and supposedly "aggressive" traits such as substance abuse, reckless driving, and shoplifting; "if the hysteric was a damaged woman, the borderline woman is a dangerous one."[37] BPD is also known to have one of the highest risks of suicide (10%) and self-harming behaviors (70%) of any mental health condition.[38] With intense emotions and feelings of chronic pain, borderlines are often described as living "with third-degree burns over 90 percent of their body. Lacking emotional skin, they feel agony at the slightest touch or movement."[39]

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[34] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 20.

[35] Janet Wirth-Cauchon, *Women and Borderline Personality Disorder: Symptoms and Stories* (Rutgers University Press, 2001), 8, https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.39-5495.

[36] Andrea Nicki, "BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER, DISCRIMINATION, AND SURVIVORS OF CHRONIC CHILDHOOD TRAUMA." *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 9, no. 1 (2016): 219. https://www.jstor.org/stable/90011865.

[37] Wirth-Cauchon, *Women and Borderline Personality Disorder: Symptoms and Stories,* 8.

[38] NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, "Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)-Understanding BPD | NYP," NewYork-Presbyterian, accessed February 17, 2024, https://www.nyp.org/bpdresourcecenter/borderline-personality-disorder/understanding-bpd.

[39] Heather Hayes, "BPD: Understanding Splitting," Heather Hayes & Associates, February 4, 2021, accessed February 25, 2024, https://www.heatherhayes.com/bpd-understanding-splitting/#_ftn1.

There are some uncanny similarities between sad girls and borderline women. This link becomes more prominent when observing that a portion of BPD content on Instagram has been directly taken from this era of Tumblr's sad girl content through screenshots. Hence, recognizing these parallels and using readings of sad girls can help read borderline self-representations as gendered self-representations. Historicizing BPD and women's sadness, and looking at the emergence of the sad girl figure, help reveal how and why gendered media self-representations, that are specific to conversations about mental illness, have a tendency to get framed as risky, sexualized, pathological, gender-typical, or otherwise "wrong" or "controversial" for various reasons. Further, Thelandersson says that the research on sad girls is limited and primarily focuses on content depicting self-harm from a "from a health care perspective that looks at how Internet spaces encourage or discourage self-injury."[40] Studies of BPD content are prone to falling into such practices and readings, and corroborate the link between sad girls and borderline women. For instance, researcher Allyson Clark focuses on how such content contributes to the self-diagnosis epidemic and the unhealthy romanticization of serious mental health conditions.[41] Exploring mental illness content that includes BPD on TikTok and Twitter, Clark highlights how romanticized portrayals of mental illness contribute to making mental illness identities desirable to users. Clark finds that self-presentations of TikTok users often glamorize mental illness and imply that their conditions contribute to their attractiveness, while Twitter users tend to discuss the struggles caused by their conditions and how they are admirable despite their diagnosis.[42]

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[40] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 158.

[41] Allyson Clark, "Social Media and Mental Illness Identity Formation: The Role of Community Culture and Misinformation" (MA thesis, The University of Texas, 2023), 12.

[42] Clark, "Social Media and Mental Illness Identity Formation: The Role of Community Culture and Misinformation."

I use the term "self-representation" to circumvent contributing to practices of framing the media representations produced by young borderline women in ways that focus on what is "good" or "bad" about them. Combining this concept with Gill's postfeminist sensibility and sad girls, this research uses an approach to emphasize what is unique about borderline self-representations and what they reveal about navigating postfeminist conditions. During my analysis, I draw from studies of sad girls to help explore how depictions of sadness and suffering in BPD content are deeply connected to questions of gender and navigating the conditions of femininity, and use those findings to help address the questions I put forth. I utilize the notion of sad girls to explore how sad girl content and BPD content run over, under, and through each other, as individual strands of a postfeminist digital culture that converge with the visibilizing of female suffering.

III. Visibility of BPD on Social Media

In her work titled *New Ways of Seeing: Tumblr, Young People, and Mental Illness,* author Natalie Ann Hendry begins by articulating her frustration with the lack of critical engagement with how young people actually *used* social media platforms such as Tumblr to make meaning from their experiences and to connect with other people.[43] She argues that the visibility of mental illness goes beyond images of self-injury or "explicit references to emotional distress,"[44] and makes notable the practice of reblogging funny memes. Using the conceptual frames of visibility as representation and recognition, and visibility as recovery and emotional authenticity,[45] Hendry states that the first frame explains how memes, 'chat' posts, and hashtags allow users with BPD to make experiences that are otherwise misunderstood or hidden, socially visible. With the second frame, Hendry illustrates the discursive nature of this content in that users need to be familiar with platform

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[43] Natalie Ann Hendry, "New Ways of Seeing: Tumblr, Young People, and Mental Illness," in *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, eds. Allison McCracken et al., 1st ed. (University of Michigan Press, 2020), 315, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11537055.

[44] Hendry, "New Ways of Seeing: Tumblr, Young People, and Mental Illness," 315.

[45] Hendry, "New Ways of Seeing," 316.

vernacular to decode intertextual elements such as from popular culture to "affectively connect with images in therapeutic ways"[46] that refer to mental illness more ambiguously. The intertextuality in BPD content suggests that a certain degree of media literacy is necessary.

Hendry delves into some specific borderline symptoms and experiences seen in the content such as fears of abandonment and "splitting" which refers to black-and-white thinking or erratic fluctuations between idealization and devaluation of oneself or another person. The black-and-white aspect refers to a notion of all good or all bad, with no middle ground or "gray area."[47] Hendry also highlights how conditions like BPD are mostly visibilized in popular discourse in ways that discriminate, alienate, and marginalize those individuals. Through the imagery of psych wards and horrific asylums, the distress caused by this condition is stigmatized and such references do little to illuminate "a less spectacular and more mundane and exhausting experience."[48] Hendry finds that "legitimating the diagnosis—and their suffering—is very important"[49] for many users. BPD is made visible using popular relevant hashtags such as #bpd, #bpdproblems, and #borderlinefeels. Hashtags like "#actuallybpd or #actuallyborderline construct BPD as an authentic experience, distinguishing it from 'just' being 'difficult' or 'attention-seeking.'"[50] Users engage with this content using Tumblr's reblogging feature because it resonates with lived experience and they collectively construct a socially and emotionally "authentic" sense of BPD.[51] Hendry also touches upon how BPD is often perceived as a character flaw of the individual, and notably of women, rather than a mental illness. Factoring Hendry's findings surrounding the importance of media literacy and the

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[46] Hendry, "New Ways of Seeing," 316.

[47] Hendry, "New Ways of Seeing," 319.

[48] Hendry, "New Ways of Seeing," 317.

[49] Hendry, "New Ways of Seeing," 319.

[50] Hendry, "New Ways of Seeing," 319.

[51] Hendry, "New Ways of Seeing," 319.

notion of an authentic self into my examination of BPD content can show if and how it functions as a genre of self-representation.

IV. Reading Suffering and Sadness as Subversive

Artist Audrey Wollen garnered widespread media coverage in 2014 with her "Sad Girl Theory." Using the tag #sadgirl, she took to posting images of herself on Instagram, often crying and with smudged makeup. Thelandersson suggests this was not simply an expression of Wollen's emotions and experiences, but a "political act on a larger scale."[52] The following is Wollen's description of Sad Girl Theory:[53]

Sad Girl Theory is the proposal that the sadness of girls should be witnessed and re-historicized as an act of resistance, of political protest. Basically, girls being sad has been categorized as this act of passivity, and therefore, discounted from the history of activism. I'm 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. There's a long history of girls who have used their own anguish, their own suffering, as tools for resistance and political agency. Girls' sadness isn't quiet, weak, shameful, or dumb: It is active, autonomous, and articulate. It's a way of fighting back.

Wollen categorically politicized the sad girl, and in interviews expressed her uneasiness with contemporary feminism's hyper-positive demands and obsession with ideas of approval, self-love, and "making it cool and fun to be a girl." Wollen took issue with this saying "It isn't really cool and fun to be a girl. It is an experience of brutal alienation and constant fear of violence."[54] Wollen challenged the hyper-positive and self-love-or-nothing feminism[55] that is popular on the Internet and isolates feminists who cannot subscribe to it. Thelandersson adds that at the time, the image of feminism visibilized in popular culture was of strength and empowerment. The idea that "feminism

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[52] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 171.

[53] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 171.

[54] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 171.

[55] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 171.

could embrace a language of weakness"[56] was one too radical to fathom.

Thelandersson also contextualizes Lisa Blackman's argument about the importance of repositioning "suffering as 'ordinary,'" which relocates negative affects from the periphery of human life to the center. Conceptualizing suffering as 'ordinary' reframes it as "not an exceptional phenomenon, but rather part and parcel of the costs of neo-liberalism(s)."[57] In her paper titled *affective politics, debility and hearing voices: towards a feminist politics of ordinary suffering,* Blackman states that this makes it possible to recognize the "difficulties of living normalized fictions and fantasies of femininity."[58] Thelandersson adds that seeing suffering as ordinary—as something persistent— allows us to draw a connection between suffering and neoliberal structures of power that "control our well-being while telling us that we have endless possibilities to maximize our mental and physical health."[59] Thelandersson states that sad girls appear to view suffering as an inescapable everyday happening and imply a "base level of constant sadness."[60] Dobson suggests that gendered media self-representations and practices to describe the pain and suffering of girls and women, which are usually framed as "wrong," may not explicitly be politically resistant or subversive, but can be viewed as "cultural modes of 'survival' and 'getting by.'"[61] Although sad girl content often contains dark themes such as suicidal ideation and self-harm, it also illustrates significant self-awareness because while the sadness portrayed is genuine, the performance is often ironic or over-blown.

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[56] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 171.

[57] Lisa Blackman, "Affective Politics, Debility and Hearing Voices: Towards a Feminist Politics of Ordinary Suffering," *Feminist Review* 111, no. 1 (November 1, 2015): 26, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2015.24.

[58] Blackman, "Affective Politics, Debility and Hearing Voices: Towards a Feminist Politics of Ordinary Suffering," 26.

[59] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 165.

[60] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 165.

[61] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 2.

At a time when feminist activism in the digital space has come to be associated with hashtag feminism by the likes of #MeToo and #WhyIStayed, the idea of a feminist as only being an empowered, vocal, and proactive individual demanding social justice needs to be abandoned to make room for alternative readings. At the same time, the complexities and contradictions in postfeminist digital cultures arising from the "double entanglement"[62] that enables specific feminist ideas to be both embraced and repudiated shouldn't be disregarded in haste. Within this framing of "getting by," the softness, weakness, and femininity of borderlines on social media should be examined in relation to how their interests lay "less in changing the world than in not being defeated by it, and meanwhile finding satisfaction in minor pleasures and major fantasies."[63]

Lastly, I also take into consideration ideas of Japanese "Cute-Cool" and 2000s girl culture due to their prevalence in BPD content to see how characters like *Hello Kitty* are reframed in self-representations for subversive purposes.

In the book *Pink Globalization*, author Christine R. Yano examines *Hello Kitty* as part of Japanese cute-cool culture. She situates cute-cool within the processes of pink globalization, describing the transnational flows of *kawaii* cultural commodities from Japan to the rest of the world.[64] Pink connotes the cute and the feminine, and Yano links this with "particular regions of the sexy embedded within the notion of *kawaii*."[65] She questions the various gendered, consumerist, and possibly political aspects of *Hello Kitty* and what they enable. She asks "What exactly is it about *Hello Kitty* that allows her to function as a nodal point—a point of juncture and perhaps even

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[62] Gill and Scharff, "Introduction," 4.

[63] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 5.

[64] Christine Reiko Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek Across the Pacific*, eBook, 1st ed. (Duke University Press, 2013), 6, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131ccn.

[65] Yano, Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek Across the Pacific, 6.

rupture—in transnational popular culture flows?"[66] Yano argues that rising postfeminism in the West has made pink or feminized self-presentation both desirable and acceptable for "some segments of the female population in the industrial world."[67] She then brings up the idea of "wink on pink" to refer to adult women who embrace *Hello Kitty*, that "it's like saying women are complicated—that we can't be contained. We can wear monochromatic Armani suits and whip out Hello Kitty note-pads at a moment's notice. . . . It's a small but very public act of rebellion."[68]

Hence, I aim to explore how the incorporation of *Hello Kitty* into borderline self-representations can be a means of expressing what Yano considers "subversive purposes."[69] This enables me to examine themes surrounding consumer culture and processes of individualization, wherein identities are formed through consumption of cultural commodities such as *Hello Kitty* or Bratz Dolls, in my analysis.

Methodology

While the social media platform of Instagram is host to many different forms and genres of BPD content, I specifically look at content that is produced and circulated by borderline girls and women and that can be categorized under the genre of self-representation. This content depicts borderline experiences that include experiences of suffering and sadness, and typically involves popular meme formats and bears similarities with sad girl content in the use of humor, irony, and popular culture. The selection of accounts and specific posts from those accounts is roughly guided by a grounded

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[66] Yano, Pink Globalization, 7.

[67] Yano, Pink Globalization, 7.

[68] Yano, Pink Globalization, 8.

[69] Yano, Pink Globalization, 199.

theory approach and three accounts—@m3lody0nmars (9791 followers), @bpdfairyprincess (59.5k followers), and @backformtheborderline (103k followers)—were chosen for analysis. I also use theoretical sampling as a method of data collection to select specific posts from the three accounts. Associated with grounded theory, the processes of data collection and analysis using theoretical sampling are iterative. In a chapter titled "Qualitative Sampling and Internet Research" in the book *Research Exposed*, Lee Humphrey explains that these processes are "interactive and nonlinear" and cyclical.[70]

Hence, to understand how the self-representations of young borderline women on Instagram constitute a gendered media practice that can reveal unique insights about how gender is lived, experienced, and represented in postfeminist digital cultures, the analysis will take place in multiple cycles. To address the main questions and aims of this research, important points of focus include the influence of neoliberalism and the parallels between the ideal neoliberal subject and ideal postfeminist subject, portrayals of suffering and sadness, constructions of new femininities, and considering how self-representations can be subversive. Using Gill's notion of a postfeminist sensibility, each cycle focuses on such themes and concepts that were previously outlined. As I proceed to choose and analyze posts in cycles, I continuously do so in relation to emerging themes and concepts. I also look for posts that affirm or contradict these themes and concepts. Throughout my analysis, I expect to see parallels with Hendry's study of BPD content on Tumblr in terms of significant intertextuality that will require a familiarity with Instagram meme formats and vernacular to decipher.

One of the key aspects that make theoretical sampling suitable for this research is the plethora of

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[70] Lee Humphrey, "Qualitative Sampling and Internet Research," eBook, in *Research Exposed*, ed. Eszter Hargittai (Columbia University Press, 2020), 82, https://doi.org/10.7312/harg18876-005.

existing research on sad girl culture and content. Humphrey states that theoretical sampling must be sufficiently informed by existing research, to "not duplicate previous findings but not to the point that it is so shackled by established theory that novel or contrasting insights cannot emerge."[71] Thelandersson's study of sad girls is helpful for explaining how I might decode the use of humor and irony in my own research. She touches upon mentions of specific conditions in her work but categorizes experiences like despair and disaffectedness as "general sad feelings."[72] Following the links I have drawn between sad girls and borderline women, I utilize Thelandersson's work particularly to explore self-representations of suffering and sadness as gendered self-representations. Thelandersson adds that sad girl content's ironic tone serves to establish feelings of relatability with others who have experienced similar things.[73] Additionally, sad feelings are linked with typically joyful and 'normal' objects such as makeup and summer vacations which turns "negative feelings into a shared comedic discourse."[74] For my own analysis, I expand upon Thelandersson's readings of such joyful and 'normal' elements to relate borderline experiences to questions of gender and constructions of feminine subjectivities in those self-representations.

Humphrey also draws upon Glaser and Strauss's work on grounded theory to suggest that their notions of maximizing and minimizing differences in a sample are helpful strategies.[75] @m3lody0nmars does not make their content's association with BPD explicit in either the user handle or profile bio. This account was included due to the use of BPD-related hashtags (which is also how they were discovered) such as #bpd, #borderlinememes, and #bpdstruggles in captions, and the thematic similarities with the content of the other accounts. All three accounts display many

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[71] Humphrey, "Qualitative Sampling and Internet Research," 83.

[72] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 159.

[73] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 166.

[74] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 166.

[75] Humphrey, "Qualitative Sampling and Internet Research," 84.

of Gill's themes, portrayals of suffering as 'ordinary,' and identity disturbances caused by cultures

of individualism and consumerism. Therefore, I minimize differences by selecting accounts that

display a uniform use of humor and irony, and a visual aesthetic constituted of overlapping popular

culture elements. For examining certain concepts such as suffering as 'ordinary,' this helps establish

"a definite set of conditions under which a category exists, either to a particular degree or as a

type."[76] While I minimize differences in the types of humor and formats I look at, I also maximize

difference based on a wide range of follower counts. Humphrey suggests that maximizing

differences can help in establishing the boundaries of research claims by "bringing out the widest

possible coverage on ranges, continua, degrees, types, and so on."[77]

Analysis

I. Digital Girls and Portraying Authenticity

With this cycle, I explain identity disturbances experienced by borderline women in relation to their

existence in a postfeminist context influenced by neoliberalism. This provides insight into their

experience of navigating a culture that encourages constant self-reinvention, portraying authenticity,

personal responsibility for well-being and success, "alongside key competences of reflexivity, self

observation and personal biographical narration"[78][79] that are often associated with femininity. I also

use Gill's themes of an increased focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment, consumption

practices, and the commodification of individual differences.

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[76] Humphrey, "Qualitative Sampling and Internet Research," 84.

[77] Humphrey, "Qualitative Sampling and Internet Research," 84.

77.

[79] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 23.

Postfeminist mediascapes have popularized the image and experience of being a young woman as being consumption focused and fun-loving, as well as physically, socially, and psychologically empowered and active.[80] According to Dobson, such constructions of femininity reflect how older models of femininity are criticized and rejected in modern neoliberal political discourses of self-governance. This is because the ideals of new femininities in postfeminist digital cultures align with neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility and meritocracy—the idea that success is achieved through hard work, ambition, and determination. It has also been argued that the notions of individual choice, independence, agency, and girl power in postfeminist constructions of femininity illustrate a "dangerous alliance" between second-wave feminism and neoliberalism.[81] This can be connected to the calls made by second-wave feminists for representing women in more active roles with agency and more "real women" in media. Dobson says that this implies "media simply *reflects* identities and subjectivities rather than *constituting* them."[82] Figures 1.1 and 1.2, which I now discuss, not only support this statement but additionally point to the implications this has for

Fig. 1.1

Fig. 1.2

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78. Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 23.

79. Karen Wilkes, "Colluding With Neo-liberalism: Post-feminist Subjectivities, Whiteness and Expressions of Entitlement on JSTOR," *Feminist Review*, no. 110 (2015): 20, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24571995?seq=1.

80. Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 26.

constructing new femininities in contemporary postfeminist mediascapes.

These posts respectively state "a girl is nothing without the media she consumes" and "I'm not a girl I'm the shadow of every piece of media I've ever consumed." There is an evident contradiction surrounding the idea of "being a girl" and identity formation through media consumption. These posts emphasize the focus on media consumption and point to an existence built around the modern consumption choices and practices of young women. Thinking through Gill's themes, we can consider how the participation of borderline women in producing these self-representations is shaped by and in relation to neoliberal discourses of individualization.

Dobson describes how scholars such as Ulrich Beck, Zygmant Bauman, and Anthony Giddens have outlined ways in which processes such as globalization have altered how identities form and function.[83] Individualization occurs in relation to culture, society, and politics, and in neoliberal and late-modern societies, the individual becomes personally responsible for how they experience life and their successes as well as failures. The "self" becomes a continuous "project" and public identity can be constantly reinvented through "skilled consumption and image management."[84] Figure 1.3 indicates that the self can be portrayed by describing one's tastes in media, such as music or movies. The post illustrates borderline women's capacity for the reflexivity, self-observation and personal biographical narration that constitute the skills required for reinventing and portraying the self, with the image of Betty Boop supporting the the idea that these competences are linked with femininity.

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[83] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 106.

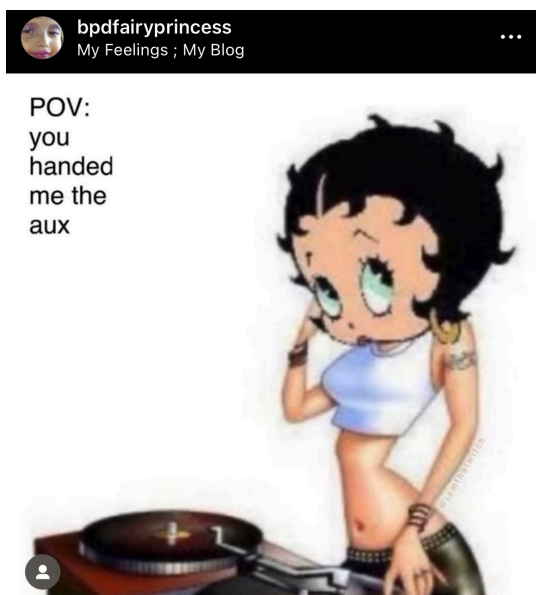[84] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 106.

Fig. 1.3

At the same time, young women are expected to present identities that conform to neoliberal ideals of girl power and appear empowered, capable, confident, and fun on social media.[85] The shadow imagery in figure 1.2 and the contradiction with figure 1.1 capture an existential tension from the pressures of portraying an authentic yet appropriately feminine self. Further, figure 1.4 states "I love being a digital girl (not real)" and with the contradicting image, this post uses irony to portray an unpleasant experience—lacking an identity—in postfeminist terms of fun and self-confidence.
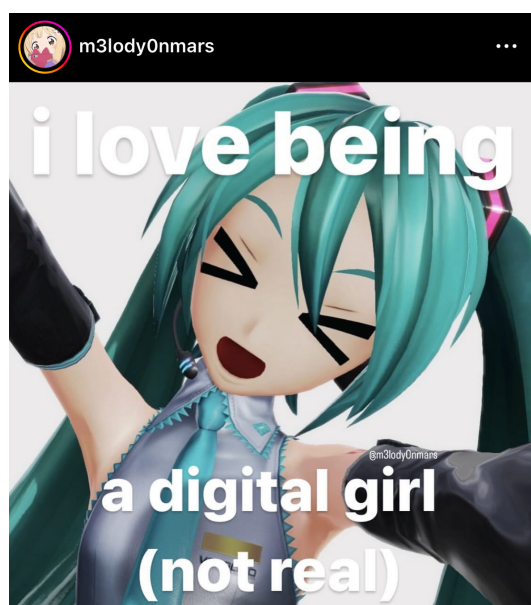

Fig. 1.4

Additionally, some posts from @backfromtheborderline critique the excessive focus on consumption and individualism in postfeminist contexts and capture the negative impact it can have on borderline women in more transparent terms by stating "how can I further commodify the self to gain purpose in life?" and "American hyper-individuality is a kind of mental illness."

Digital girls capture some nuanced difficulties of portraying authenticity in postfeminist digital cultures, and the pressures for young women to present specific and markedly feminine identities. Self-representations of identity disturbances experienced by borderline women illustrate the contradiction of having to self-regulate, self-govern, and self-reinvent while also presenting themselves as individual and autonomous in postfeminist

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[85] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 40.

conditions. This examination helps in understanding some of the ways in which neoliberalism

contributes to the difficulties of navigating conditions of postfeminism and femininity. It also shows

the parallels between postfeminism and neoliberalism outlined by Gill, such as the focus on

individualism that places the burden of responsibility on the individual (often women), and the

focus on self-reinvention. As another post from @backformtheborderline articulates this

contradiction, "[women's] freedom can only be achieved through discipline." There is a strong

indication that contemporary practices of media consumption and the conscious and mediated self-

representations that follow are how feminine gender identities are disciplined in postfeminist digital

cultures.

II. Heterosexiness and Sad Hot Girls

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 fall under Gill's theme of sexual objectification becoming sexual

subjectification. Many borderline self-representations utilize such "postfeminist" constructions of a

strong, sexy, hot, assertive, confident, and autonomous femininity that has become pervasive and

normalized in postfeminist mediascapes through recent media, popular culture, and

celebrityculture.[86] These posts from @bpdfairyprincess show the shift in media representations of

women, from passive objects of the male gaze to active and desiring sexual subjects, who opt to

show themselves in this supposedly objectified way because it falls in line with their liberated

interests.[87]

Gill states that this shift is essential to the concept of postfeminist sensibility because it marks a

modernization of femininity to incorporate a "technology of sexiness" in which sexual knowledge

and practices are key. These posts construct female sexiness and desirability through postfeminist

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[86] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 4.

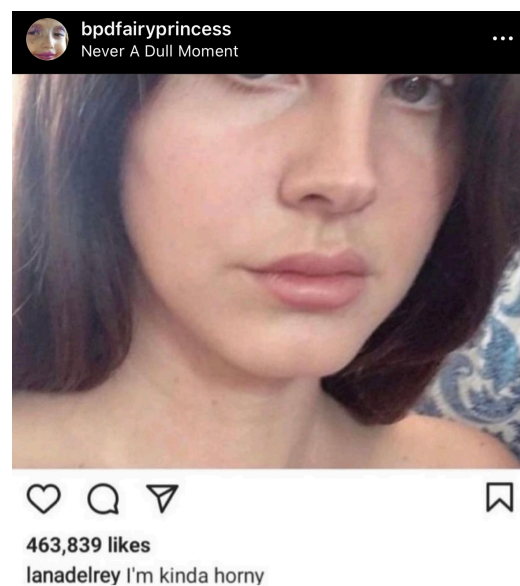[87] Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture."

Fig. 2.1

Fig. 2.2

narratives of choice and agency with references to self-pleasure, desire, and authenticity. We see the shift from an "external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze"[88] which is a contemporary but key dimension of control or "'technology' of enacting idealized 'sexy' femininity"[89] across postfeminist media. These posts show how borderline women are portraying themselves as being both skilled and taking pleasure in various sexual behaviors.[90] However, figure 2.2 features singer Lana Del Rey who is widely regarded as a symbol of the cultural turn towards expressions of female sadness and weakness. According to Thelandersson, Rey is the most popular figure in the context of sad girl content[91] and supports a key underlying assumption for this research that sad girls and borderline women have a lot in common. Hence, the sad girl significations of Rey complicate the meanings of sexualized self-representations in BPD content and require deeper examinations.

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88 Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture."

89 Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture."

90 Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture."

91 Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 169.

For instance, Bratz Dolls are frequently seen in borderline self-representations, but may not simply point to the construction of such a modernized and "empowered" postfeminist femininity.

When they made their debut in 2001, Bratz Dolls were considered the "anti-barbie"[92] and the first real rival to Barbie dolls. However, they still perpetuate similar unrealistic beauty standards with their large eyes, pouty and glossy lips, skinny physiques, and unrealistic body proportions.
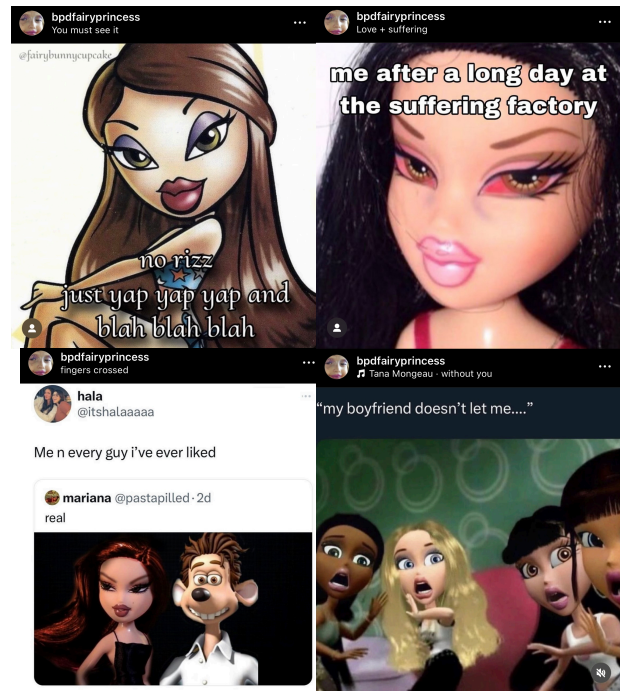

Fig. 2.3

Bratz Dolls are essentially a group of girlfriends who have fun, shop, and choose outfits together and often wear clothes that are provocative and display confidence, but not overly sexualized. Although their racial identities are ambiguously defined, Bratz Dolls brought some amount of ethnic diversity that Barbie lacked in the 2000s.[93] Additionally, as there was no equivalent to Barbie's Ken, they could be seen as enacting ideals of femininity for "themselves" as opposed to catering to the male gaze.[94] They were better-suited to postfeminist notions of an "empowered" femininity involving consumerism, marketable diversity, and sexual subjectification. Hence, Bratz Dolls illustrate the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas in borderline self-representations.

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[92] Corinne Vient, "The Triumphs and Drawbacks in How Bratz Dolls Paved a New Path for Femininity and Sexuality," *Medium*, December 14, 2021, accessed April 23, 2024, https://medium.com/@corinnevient/the-triumphs-and-drawbacks-in-how-bratz-dolls-paved-a-new-path-for-femininity-and-sexuality-c9ef2109bab8.

[93] Desjah Altvater, "How Bratz Dolls Influenced Gen-Z Fashion and Beauty Standards," *Girls United*, August 25, 2022, accessed April 19, 2024, https://girlsunited.essence.com/article/bratz-dolls-gen-z-fashion-influence/.

[94] Altvater, "How Bratz Dolls Influenced Gen-Z Fashion and Beauty Standards."

It has been argued that new femininities retain elements of traditional femininity like beauty and

sexiness while rejecting traits such as passivity and dependence to reposition young women as

active and choice-making agents.[95] The retention of traits related to physical attractiveness can be

seen more clearly in figures 2.4 and 2.5. Along with the posts featuring Bratz Dolls, this content

Fig. 2.4

Fig. 2.5

illustrates the pressures on young borderline women to portray the body and the self as

"heterosexy." Dobson uses this term to emphasize the heteronormativity and contradictions

embedded in the specific postfeminist and empowered femininity demanded of young women in

postfeminist digital cultures. Young women are expected to portray themselves as "heterosexy, but

not sexualized, confident, independent, "authentic," and "transparent," but not narcissistic; to be

markedly visible and exposed in very specific and conditional ways."[96] The textual components of

these posts allow us to start seeing what is distinct about the self-representations of borderline

women as they participate in a gendered media practice largely centered around sharing vulnerable

moments in an effort to appear authentic and relatable.[97] Specifically, heterosexy selves are being

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[95] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 34.

[96] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 15.

[97] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 160.

constructed ironically and alongside displays of sadness, moments of vulnerability, and broader notions of "weak" femininities that also happen to be pathologized, as traits of conventional femininity in borderline women. The texts state "my life is a tragic comedy but at least I'm hot" and "my tits are too nice for my life to be like this" and capture the contradiction of how along with physical traits of attractiveness, women in postfeminist contexts are additionally expected to be tough, resilient, and strong, which places them in a "double bind."[98] Through these self-representations, we see an entanglement of "weak" and "empowered" notions of femininity. While leaning into physical ideals of beauty, "hotness," and sexual subjectification and using a postfeminist language of a self-assured confidence, the use of irony and humor capture borderline women's inability to embody the emotional qualities required for the ideal feminine and heterosexy self. These self-representations illustrate the inability of borderline women to subscribe to postfeminist and neoliberal feminine ideals and hence can be seen as demonstrating a "passive" resistance reminiscent of sad girls. They emphasize the difficulties of existing in a double bind and the pressures to remain in it at the same time.

III. Do-Nothing Girls and the Myth of Can-Do Girls

I use this next cycle to delve deeper into the entanglement of "weak" and "empowered" notions of femininities and feminisms in borderline self-representations. Dobson argues that in addition to physical attractiveness, there are other traits that separate current ideal feminine subjectivities from previous models of femininity that were constructed using notions of passivity, weakness, victimhood, and dependence. The image of a new "empowered" femininity that flourished with second-wave feminism created an oppositional binary with the image of the old "weak" femininity.

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98 Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 41.

Dependency is both a marker of weak femininity and one that is pathologized as a conventional feminine trait in borderlines. Contemporary feminism conveys to young women that they are independent and do-it-all "girl bosses," who can and therefore should, maintain successful jobs and careers. Further, Thelandersson writes that in studies of negative affects in an otherwise positive emotional landscape, affective dissonances can be understood as the problematizing of "accessibility and appeal of highly individualist career-oriented lifestyles idealized in cultural mythologies of powerful 'can-do' girls."[99] Following this, figure 3.1 which says "jobs are a great concept but its just not realistic" indicates that these ideals and lifestyles are unattainable for some borderline women. It problematizes the popularization of such ideals that seldom sympathize with or even acknowledge the population of women finding themselves distanced from these ideals due to mental health conditions such as BPD or a host of other individual attributes and experiences.

Fig. 3.1

Second-wave feminism ushered a new era of perspective on gendered media representations of women. Many feminist scholars of the time critiqued Western media for only representing women as mothers, wives, or sexual objects, and argued how such representations socialize women into confining and conventional gender roles.[100] These discourses have helped enable more girls and women to become producers of media, and more in control of their representation in media spaces today. Dobson says that feminist critiques at the time seem to have an implicit hope that with more female producers of media and culture, representation will automatically diversify in time. There is

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[99] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 3.

[100] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 25.

an expectation that male monopoly over representation in media and culture will eventually break down and significant social change will occur. However, even with the exponential boom in young girls and women participating in self-representation and digital cultural production, female media representation remains largely material and profit-based, and does not contribute to achieving gender equality and social justice.[101] Most women continue to be socialized to step into conventional gender roles "as subordinated housewives, mothers, consumers, and lower-paid workers."[102] They remain instrumental in helping the capitalist economy function and in sustaining the ruling class, but additionally expected to be model neoliberal subjects that are carriers of representation of individualism and freedom.[103]

This can be considered as a pressure and contradiction of postfeminist conditions, and one that some borderline self-representations point out in particular.

Fig. 3.2

Fig. 3.3

Figures 3.2 and 3.3 can be read as critiques of the terms of modern femininity, and as demonstrations of resistance against broad neoliberal and capitalist forces that are at play. Figure

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[101] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 26.

[102] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 27.

[103] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 27.

3.2 states "What do you mean I have to get a job, get married, have kids, and die??" and can be seen as a negotiating of the requirement for young women to step into conventional gender roles as wives in heterosexual marriages and mothers. Figure 3.3 states "repeat after me[:] there is nothing to sustain in a capitalist society" and draws attention to the capitalist structures that gain the most benefit from women as ideal neoliberal subjects. The tone is similar to what Dobson describes as declarations of one's own ability to be authentic and "being true to yourself."[104] Additionally, the phrasing can point to how borderline users establish relational and peer support with one another because it is said "somewhat instructively."[105]
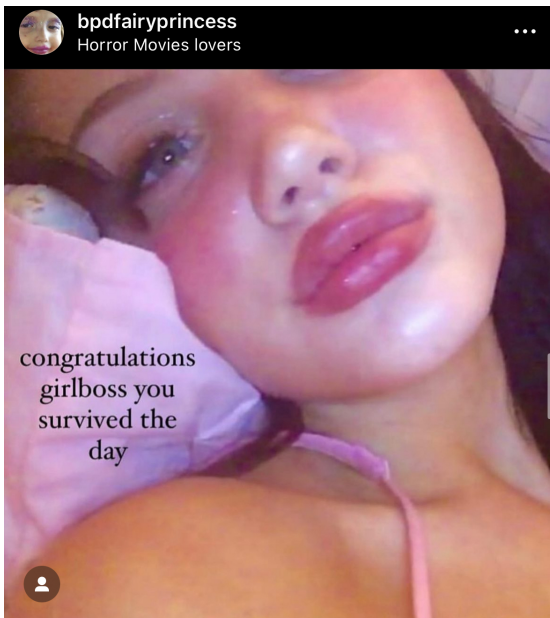

Fig. 3.4

Figure 3.4 is another example and states "congratulations girlboss you survived the day." The term "girlboss" in this post is used ironically and conveys the idea that simply going through the motions and coping with day-to-day life is a struggle for borderline women. It can be understood as a shared recognition of the pressures placed upon women to be successful and to distance themselves from "weak" and "passive" understandings of femininity. The accompanying image also illustrates a construction of heterosexiness. Overall, his post supports an understanding of borderline self-representations as cultural modes of "survival" for "getting by" in postfeminist conditions.

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104 Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 125.

105 Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 125.

IV. How It (Really) Feels to Be A Girl

In this cycle, I utilize the understanding of sad girls and their similarities with borderline women

that was established earlier, to understand how borderline women portray the modern living of

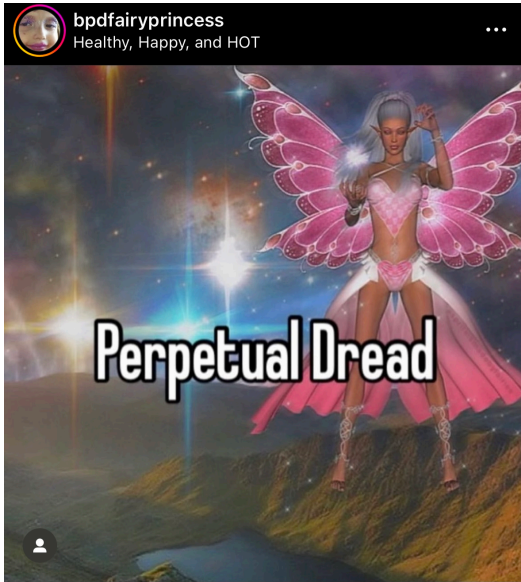young femininity through Blackman's notion of suffering as 'ordinary.'
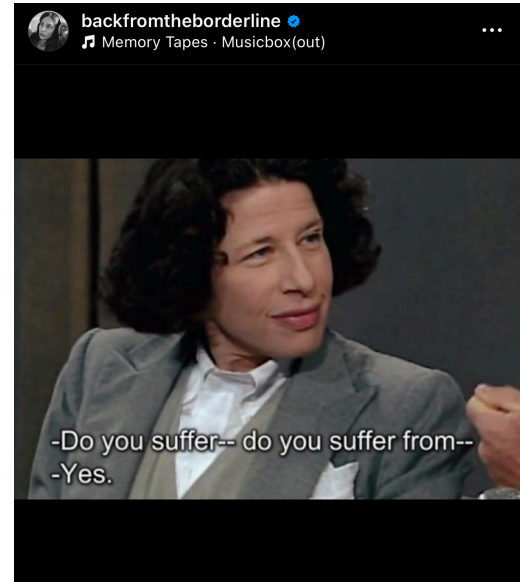

Fig. 4.1

Fig. 4.2

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show suffering being framed as ordinary in borderline self-representations.

There appears to be less emphasis on suffering *from* a specific condition like BPD, or a symptom

that is particularly debilitating, and more on suffering as a pronounced feature of day-to-day

existence. In addition to being described as a feeling of "perpetual dread" as seen in figure 4.1, the

experience can be seen described using similar language such as "I'm in agony," "all I do is

endure," and "existence is insufferable." Contextualizing the visual element of figure 4.2 provides

some additional insights. The image features American public figure Fran Lebowitz in Martin

Scorsese's 2021 Netflix docu-series called *Pretend It's a City*. The series documents Lebowitz's

depiction of "vicissitudes of contemporary urban life—its fads, trends, crazes, morals, and fashions"

in a manner that is "ironic, facetious, deadpan, sarcastic, [and] wry."[106] This supports the broad

argument made by Sad Girl Theory and Blackman that suffering becomes ordinary in contemporary

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[106] "Fran Lebowitz," accessed March 22, 2024, https://franlebowitz.com/.

postfeminist mediascapes that are marked by neoliberal processes such as individualization, focus on consumption, and the commodification of individual differences. Taking a finding from previous cycles into consideration, the constant experience of suffering can potentially also be linked to having to constantly self-reinvent in such a postfeminist context.

Additionally, some content indicates that the cultures of individualism that plague postfeminist and neoliberal digital mediascapes add to that suffering. Many borderline self-representations portray a complex relationship with the self, and feelings of self-hate, blame, and guilt as normalized experiences. A post from @m3lody0nmars says "I am trapped in a cycle caused by my own poor choices and failure to fix my mental issues" and suggests that these feelings stem from the burden of responsibility when it comes to managing and self-improving mental health conditions. A complex relationship with the self that involves experiencing erratic fluctuations between self-love and self-hate is associated with the BPD symptom of "splitting," and is a form of identity instability in borderlines. Figure 4.3 is an example of such content and uses an image of popular culture figures Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian from the 2000s to represent the simultaneous experiencing of self love and self-hate. In a broader sense, this image is also an example of how 2000s popular culture has significantly shaped the femininities constructed by borderline women in their self-representations. Particularly in relation to the idea of media constituting identities that came up in the first cycle, it is important to touch upon what 2000s popular culture elements and figures can signify.

Fig. 4.3

Fig. 4.4

Dobson proposes that in postfeminist digital cultures, female celebrities such as Paris Hilton signify a type of authenticity; the "Paris self-brand" is "hyperfeminine, thin, white, and blonde; consumer focused, with a taste for luxury and expensive high-fashion brand names that is *naturalized*."[107] It is possible that the borderline community of Instagram has embraced the image of Paris Hilton because she seems to be engaging with heterosexy consumer culture and aesthetics of femininity in ways that seem agentic and come across "as both *playful* and *authentic*."[108] At the same time, the text and meanings pertaining to borderline experiences that are always attached to these images display an ironic and even subversive use of popularized constructions of femininity to visibilize a much less glamorous and much more mundane life of suffering. For instance, figure 4.4 is an image of Paris Hilton with a vast quantity of shopping bags that embodies the Paris self-brand. Excessive consumption and not being frugal with money is pathologized as an undesirable feminine trait in borderline women. However, the text reframes the image and says "me buying myself a present daily to get a dopamine hit now that it's dark at 3pm." Rather than positioning hyper-consumption as a feminine trait of the fun-loving, empowered, and agentic young woman who fits the image of the ideal postfeminist and neoliberal subject, it is represented as a coping mechanism for borderline women experiencing seasonal depression, using irony.

Building upon these findings, self-representations that can be seen as portraying suffering as 'ordinary' can often also relate closely to Wollen's Sad Girl Theory. Surrounded by hyper-positive

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[107] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 63.

[108] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 64.

ideas of what it means to be a girl and glamorized media representations of girlhood, borderline women critique the normalized fictions and fantasies of femininity. Through these self-representations, they pull away the curtain to reveal that in reality, the experience is of constant pain and suffering.

Fig. 4.5

Fig. 4.6

Figures 4.5 and 4.6 describe the experience as being "ripped open and sad like all the time," and the image of the lamb—feminized with pink cheeks and a bow—embodies notions of victimhood, vulnerability, and weakness that are undesirable traits of conventional femininity in postfeminist and neoliberal digital cultures.

Other self-representations to describe this experience in similar language include:

"Life terrifies me. It's harsh, and bleak and draining" —@backfromtheborderline

"Truth is, it's a disaster to be a girl" —@backfromtheborderline

"girls be like 'I'm fine' but their chest feels like a hole being torn larger and larger —@backfromtheborderline

"I'm like if a girl was really really miserable" —@m3lody0nmars

Another post from @m3lody0nmars says "it's so hard being the sexiest, funniest girl in every room" and is a comedic critique of popular feminism's demands that center around women's bodies

and emphasize individual traits such as confidence and high self-esteem as "particularly useful to neoliberal self-reliance and capitalist success."[109]

V. Performing Femininity and Bed-Rotting

Borderline self-representations illustrate a trend of using post-feminist language of empowerment, not to encourage women to be strong and resilient, but to publicly display vulnerability and sadness. This relates to Thelandersson's suggestion that such articulations of sadness and vulnerability stem from the pressures on young women to portray themselves as relatable and authentic in postfeminist and neoliberal digital cultures while enacting idealized notions of femininity. For instance, some

Fig. 5.1

self-representations of suffering such as figure 5.1 draw attention to the pressures of performing femininity, with posts across multiple accounts using the phrase "to be a woman is to perform." Imagery surrounding the act of screaming or crying is often seen and can show how like the sad girl figure, borderline women are acting out their pain for others to see on social media. Such self-representations can represent a way of resisting the expectations and requirements to perform femininity and assume conventional gender roles.

Figure 5.2 illustrates the use of a "x is a spectrum" meme format, often taking the shape of "girlhood is a spectrum" in BPD content to portray two contradictory experiences. This post in particular indicates that girlhood involves "bed-rotting" and performing femininity.

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[109] Thelandersson, 21st Century Media and Female Mental Health, 123.

Fig. 5.2

Associated with self-care trends and gendered media practices, bed-rotting refers to staying in bed, not to sleep, but to avoid participating in activities requiring significant effort, or to cope with intense emotions, stress, or anxiety.[110] Borderline self-representations do not position bed-rotting as friendly advice but use ironic references to suggest that it is a shared routine activity among users.
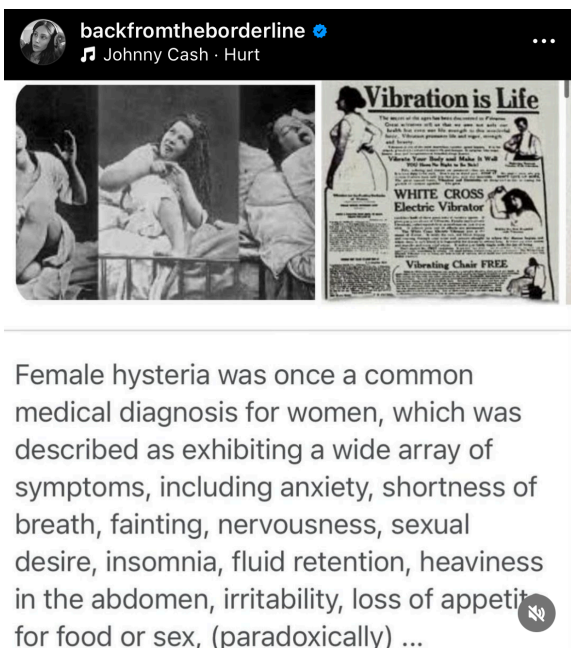

Fig. 5.3

References to female hysteria and lobotomy procedures that have a similar sexist history to hysteria are notable as well. Figure 5.3 can be seen as an acknowledgement that the "borderline" diagnosis functions similarly to how a diagnosis of "hysteria" did in the past and illustrates a certain degree of awareness and understanding of BPD's gendered history and present-day conceptualizations. A highly controversial and dangerous procedure banned today, most lobotomies have historically been performed on women. An article by Kamal Zaheer detailing the sexist history of this procedure states that lobotomies rendered the patient childlike and "easier to manage."[111] The gender

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[110] Britney Heimuli, "What Is 'Bed Rotting' and What Do Experts Have to Say About It?," *Deseret News*, July 10, 2023, accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.deseret.com/2023/7/10/23789774/experts-share-about-bed-rotting/.

[111] Komal Zaheer, "A Disturbing History of Lobotomies; Why Most Were Performed on Women," *Zip It*, April 4, 2019, accessed April 23, 2024, https://zipit.pk/a-disturbing-history-of-lobotomies-why-most-were-performed-on-women/.

Fig. 5.4

disparities have been linked to the fact that women were "better candidates" because they were diagnosed with depression and mania more frequently than men. Zaheer adds that there was an "excessive need to sedate and tranquilize outspoken and opinionated women who were depressed because of the pressures of the household."[112] Following this, a post from @backfromtheborderline stating "if [you] aren't someone the church would've killed 400 years ago are you even living??" and a post from @bpdfairyprincess stating "a lobotomy wouldn't even affect me" can be seen as subversive. Historically, the inability of women, particularly women with mental health conditions, to subscribe to normalized ideals of femininity and conventional gender roles has been pathologized, stigmatized, and demonized under the "witch" label leading to religious persecution, and subjection to cruel medical procedures. These self-representations visibilize the suffering of borderline women and highlight the difficulties that stem from embodying "undesirable" or "inappropriate" traits of conventional and unconventional femininity.

Posts such as figure 5.4 also convey that borderline women feel sympathetic towards historical female figures who suffered in ways that are relatable to them even today. There may be some comfort in acknowledging that they are not alone in their suffering and sadness, and that there is a long history of women who have also suffered and felt alienated. Many borderline women may feel misunderstood, and get subjected to diagnoses they may find limiting, such as BPD, which pathologize many traits of femininity. Self-representations show borderline women resonating with

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[112] Zaheer, "A Disturbing History of Lobotomies; Why Most Were Performed on Women."
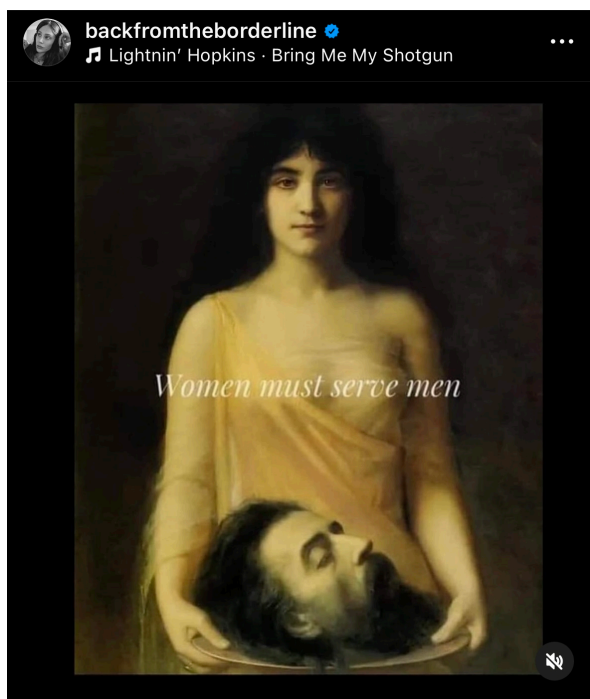
Fig. 5.5

images of Victorian-era women laying down—effectively bed-rotting—while embodying notions of vulnerability, passivity, and weakness. A post from @backfromtheborderline provides critical insight into this experience of affectively resonating with suffering women from the past:

"Time, history, looks, lives. I saw a painting of a woman staring at the ground at a local art gallery from a hundred years ago and I knew exactly how she felt. Nothing means anything compared to this. All our differences fall apart at the feet of girlhood. I know you."

This strongly relates to Thelandersson's description of how seeing someone express a certain affect can influence you to adopt the same affect. She says that in response to witnessing a display of affect in someone, there is a tendency to resonate with and experience the same affect. Content that portrays negative affect gets circulated and engaged with, and resonates with individual borderline users to result in a shared or mutual "sad girl affect."[113] There is a suggestion that the experience of being a girl is as difficult now as it was at other points in time, because the requirement for women to perform and fit specific notions of femininity has largely remained unchanged, and that the inability to do so often results in the marginalization of women. Hence, these self-representations serve as a re-historicizing of women's pain and sadness to make it autonomous and even subversive. Also using imagery of historical artwork portraying women, figure 5.5 shows a subversion of conventional gender roles and heterosexual dynamics, using humor to make a play on two different ideas of "serving."

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[113] Thelandersson, *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health*, 161.

Fig. 6.1

VI. Female Rage and Making 'Cute' Subversive

With this final cycle I wish to highlight how borderline self-representations that capture the modern experience of living and performing gender, may reframe 'cute' for subversive purposes. Small animals such as hamsters and bunnies, and Sanrio characters such as *Hello Kitty* and *My Melody* are prevalent in this context.

Figure 6.1 can be seen as subversive due to the theme of female rage that is being portrayed with the text "tired of being a sweet girl I need a gun." To contextualize the idea of a "sweet girl," it is relevant to see Dobson's exploration of how women have been socialized to put the needs and desires of others above their own, and raised to "*appear* happy and be nice to others,"[114] regardless of their actual feelings. Second-wave feminism critiqued these practices and as a result, postfeminist sensibilities emphasize individual desire and choice for purposes of self-empowerment. With the bunny that symbolizes victimhood, vulnerability, and weakness in association with femininity, there is a stark contrast with the imagery of guns that are typically considered masculine.

Research to investigate the relationship between feminist identity, gun ownership, and women's empowerment has additionally highlighted that practices involving firearms can be both anti-feminist and feminist.[115] Author Margaret S. Kelley notes that gun ownership is seen as

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[114] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 126.

[115] Margaret S. Kelley, "Feminism and Firearms: Gun Ownership, Gun Carrying, and Women's Empowerment," *Sociological Perspectives* 65, no. 1 (July 28, 2021): 77–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/07311214211028603.

m3lody0nmars

@m3lody0nmars

i'm a perfect pretty princess and i harbor enough rage to kill a man

Fig. 6.3

empowering by many women, particularly in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement. Kelley points out however that the actual use of guns for self-defense purposes often leads to vilification by media and harsh treatments from the criminal justice system. What is most interesting is the mentioning that there is a lack of cultural frames within which a woman "aggressively fighting for her own survival"[116] can be explained. This can relate to how the postfeminist context calls upon women to distance themselves from older, weaker, and less autonomous notions of femininity, but is critical of the ways in which they choose to do so.

Further, previous cycles have shown how a lot of identity work in this cultural context takes place through media consumption and borderline self-representations indicate that as a cultural object, *Hello Kitty* and the broader world of Sanrio are part of the consumption practices of many borderline women. With a pink and *Hello Kitty*-branded Lego gun, figure 6.2 portrays a subversive appropriation of the character.

Subversive *Hello Kitty* fans have been extensively examined in the context of the feminist underground Riot Grrrl movement of the 90s and 2000s.[117] Alternative media produced by this movement has been a significant site of radical "girl culture" and associated with third-wave feminism, this movement was formed by girls who were empowered, angry, funny, and "extreme through and for each other."[118] They took control of how they expressed themselves, from media to personal style. That style included 'cute' and feminine products such as *Hello Kitty* being reframed

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[116] Kelley, "Feminism and Firearms: Gun Ownership, Gun Carrying, and Women's Empowerment."

[117] Yano, Pink Globalization, 202.

[118] Yano, Pink Globalization, 202.

as embracing stereotypes with confidence.[119] Riot Grrrls took 'girly' culture, of which cuteness was

a big part, and made it their own, "whether straight up, ironized, or parodied."[120] Yano states that

'cute' and *kawaii* have extended their range as public signifiers, and the iconicity of *Hello Kitty*

across the industrial and global world makes her a "shorthand for irony, humor, and girl power."[121]

Coming back to Yano's notion of "wink on pink," figure 6.2 illustrates

pinkness in a position of power and illustrates as "edginess seeking to overturn or at least challenge

structures.[122] Yano adds that the "power of pink" translates to the power of the "global girl," whose

occasionally subversive intentions get placed in the "Japanese paws of Hello Kitty as an alternative

expression."[123] Figure 6.3 also captures this notion of wink on pink, with the text stating "I'm a

perfect pretty princess and I harbor enough rage to kill a man."

Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis was to uncover the unique insights that the gendered self-

representations of young borderline women can provide into the complex process of navigating

postfeminist conditions. This research is situated in the context of a shifting, contemporary,

postfeminist, and neoliberal media landscape, marked by the emergence of a sad girl culture and the

heightened presence of conversations about mental illness in online spaces. Dobson suggests that

for feminist scholars of media, culture, and girlhood studies, it is more important than ever to

investigate the self-representational media practices of young girls women, and the seemingly new

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[119] Yano, Pink Globalization, 202.

[120] Yano, Pink Globalization, 202.

[121] Yano, Pink Globalization, 8.

[122] Yano, Pink Globalization, 265.

[123] Yano, Pink Globalization, 265.

feminine subjectivities that get constructed (and reconfigured). However, it is even more important to take a more "slowed-down" approach towards these practices and specific online communities, such as Instagram's borderline community, to understand them on socio-political and psychological levels.[124]

Utilizing a similar approach, the hope was to *learn something* about the lives of young borderline women and not *evaluate* their media practices through binary notions of good/bad.[125] Inspired by my some of my own experiences, this research builds upon feminist conceptualizations of mental illness and the repeated pathologizing of women's sadness. It draws attention to BPD as a gendered condition, and the examined content as gendered media self-representations. This research attempts to examine BPD content in a way that is separated from some existing studies of girls' and young women's digital media practices that tend to frame their mediated self-representations as risky, sexualized, pathological, gender-typical, "wrong," or "problematic." By conceptualizing BPD content as a genre of self-representation that is particularly prone to such framing, I identify what is distinctive about how the experience of living and performing gender is portrayed in this content, against the backdrop of a postfeminist and neoliberal digital culture. Using theoretical sampling and Gill's notion of a postfeminist sensibility as an analytical lens, the multiple and iterative cycles of analysis emphasize upon the many pressures, difficulties, and contradictions that are placed upon young women in these cultures. Thelandersson's work on sad girl culture guides the reading of suffering and sadness in self-representations as gendered, and helps me identify how they can be subversive.

The guiding subquestions for this research, very fittingly, have entangling answers.

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[124] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 7.

[125] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 8.

The emphasis on personal choice and individualism puts the burden of responsibility for well-being and success on the individual, and constitutes a pressure that leaves borderline women feeling and portraying vulnerability. The findings on *digital girls* bring out the difficulties of portraying authentic feminine selves in a postfeminist digital culture marked by neoliberal processes of individualization through media consumption, and the pressures upon young women to constantly self-reinvent and self-regulate. These self-representations communicate the struggle of having to meticulously juggle both the internal and external demands placed upon young borderline women, to enact and embody "appropriate" femininities while appearing confident and relatable. Additionally, 2000s popular culture significantly shapes the constructions of new femininities that in many ways are reconfigurations and/or amalgamations of old and new femininities. These feminine subjectivities entail many contradictions and embody feminine traits that are old and new, "weak" and "empowered," and conventional and unconventional.

Borderline self-representations ironically reference popular culture and celebrity culture to establish a very different narrative of being a young woman in a postfeminist context. Celebrity figures such as Paris Hilton represent the ideal postfeminist subject of a fun-loving, consumption-focused, and hyper-feminine young woman, and are associated with portrayals of authenticity in postfeminist contexts. While shopping and being consumption-focused is positively associated with postfeminist ideas of empowered femininities, it is simultaneously pathologized as a symptom in BPD diagnostic criteria, as an impulsive and self-destructive behavior associated with conventional femininities. This indicates that in postfeminist conditions, women's spending and consumption habits are only positively responded to when they coexist with other neoliberal ideals of emotional resilience and happiness. For sad and suffering borderline women, it is reframed with negative connotations. Hence, these references and self-representations illustrate both contradictory pressures and a

subverting of contemporary ideals of femininity that illustrate ways of coping, surviving, and "getting by" in postfeminist conditions.

Further, this content serves as a nuanced critique of postfeminist ideas of "empowered" femininities, with notions of "weak" femininities being reframed and made subversive. Self-representations featuring subversive appropriations of *Hello Kitty,* who is associated with notions of "weak" femininities and passivity, illustrate parallels with subversive *Hello Kitty* fans like Riot Grrrls. Across multiple cycles in the analysis, older and "weak" femininities can be seen entangling with new and "empowered" femininities. The appearance of *Sanrio* characters and ideas of "cuteness" in BPD content hence relates to both Yano's work on Japanese Cute-Cool cultures and Gill's ideas of a "double-entanglement" of feminist and anti-feminist ideas as well as multiple and contesting notions of femininity, that were previously discussed. These self-representations suggest that *Hello Kitty* allows borderline women to convey the contradictory pressures and ideas of femininity imposed upon them in postfeminist contexts, and show that elements of *kawaii* and cuteness are made subversive. By describing their suffering, borderlines can be seen as navigating the conditions of postfeminism and creating feminine personas that aid them in attaining the "relational and peer support, social legitimation, and pleasure needed to get by."[126] Dobson uses the term "juxtapolitical" to describe how such a cultural sphere sits firmly next to, but not in politics, and responds to it.[127] Hence, it can be argued that BPD content is politically significant in what it reveals about negotiating the conditions of femininity and postfeminism in "contemporary techno-social mediascapes."[128] In addition to providing insight into the difficulties and contradictory pressures faced by young women navigating postfeminist conditions, borderline self-representations

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[126] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 5.

[127] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 5.

[128] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 2.

can also illustrate how releasing negative affect on social media and can be a unique form of resistance in postfeminist digital cultures.

Through portrayals of authenticity and heterosexy feminine selves, borderline women illustrate the key competencies of media literacy that support Hendry's findings on constructing an authentic sense of BPD in layered and intertextual content. Additionally, these self-representations indicate that these competencies and degree of sophistication are essential to visual constructions of heterosexiness, as suggested by Dobson. In a postfeminist context that demands young women to distance themselves, or define themselves by responding to, notions of old or traditional femininities associated with weakness, passivity, and dependence, this necessity for media literacy can have important implications relevant to this discussion.

The expectation to portray heterosexiness demands significant effort and labor from young women. For borderline women who, like sad girls, struggle with neoliberal ideals of femininity, the task of "digitally mediating heterosexiness"[129] is much more difficult and makes it much more likely for them to enact these authentic and femininities in supposedly "wrong ways." Clark's research on the romanticization of serious mental health conditions, and studies that have a similar focus from health-care perspectives, are a crucial testament to this. Focusing on issues of incorrect self-diagnoses and misinformation about complex and stigmatized conditions like BPD is no doubt necessary. However, one must question how these "judgments intersect with embodied identities and experiences of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and physical ability."[130]

Therefore, I end with a proposal of what what future research surrounding the media practices of women with BPD can include. Self-representations of heterosexiness, and broader expressions of sexual desire and agency in BPD content could be read in relation to the experiences of sexual

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[129] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 160.

[130] Dobson, Postfeminist Digital Cultures, 160.

abuse that are a cause of significant trauma in borderline women. Using humor, playful self-constructed femininities can help borderline women cope with such traumatic experiences, and even signal their attempts to reclaim their sexual agency in some cases. The scope of this study could not accommodate enough accounts and posts to delve into such insights into the analysis section of this study. However, if posts such as figure A seen below, from the Instagram account @momsborderdaughter, suggest that traumatic sexual experiences lead to feelings of lost sexual autonomy, then it is plausible that content that is attached to ideas of sexual desire and agency can and should be read as ways of coping and "getting by" in postfeminist conditions. Studies could

look at self-representational meme accounts similar to those included in this study, in combination with more educational and research-based accounts that approach borderline experiences in more serious tones and language. Different methodological approaches using interviews with borderline women engaging in these media practices and and analyses of comment sections under posts could provide new insights as well.

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