

Exploring the Phenomenon of Sadfishing among College Students

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Citation: Suman O, Benita A Daniel (2024) Exploring the Phenomenon of Sadfishing among College Students, J Forensic Crime Stu 12(2): 206

Received Date: December 20, 2024 **Accepted Date:** January 20, 2026 **Published Date:** January 28, 2025

Abstract

Sympathy- seeking behavior or “sadfishing”, the act of exaggerating emotional distress on social media to gain “attention, satisfaction and support system. In recent years, this kind of act have rise of social media platform. This has become online interactions and potential psychology and social effects of behavior have become topics of interest. This study was prevalence and implication was done among the individuals through Questionnaire. Which was surveyed among college student. The Questionnaire covered key aspects of the participants in three dimension like attention, satisfaction and support system. The study provides valuable insights into the emerging phenomenon of sadfishing, though it also presented limitations such as potential self-report biases and lack of contextual depth. Future research could benefit from integrating observational methods and experimental designs to build a more nuanced understanding of sadfishing and its implications in the digital age.

Keywords: Sadfishing; Youth; Attitude; Forensic Psychology; Forensic Science; Criminology

Background

In the contemporary digital landscape, where social media platforms dominate interpersonal communication, the sharing of personal experiences has become a means of both connection and validation. Among the emerging behaviors within this ecosystem is sadfishing, a term coined to describe the practice of exaggerating emotional distress or hardship on social media to elicit sympathy, attention, or support [1]. This behavior lies at the intersection of personal vulnerability, social validation, and the attention economy, reflecting the complexities of human interaction in the digital age. While sadfishing might offer short-term emotional rewards, its broader implications for mental health, online authenticity, and social dynamics remain a subject of growing academic interest [2, 3]. The term "sadfishing" was first used by author Rebecca Reid in 2019 to describe situations where individuals exaggerate their emotional problems online in order to gain sympathy, attention, or support [4]. The term gained popularity as it resonated with common behaviors observed on social media platforms.

Sadfishing can be understood as both a coping mechanism and a performative act. Rooted in genuine emotional expression but amplified for social capital, it is emblematic of the pressures of living in an attention economy where visibility and validation hold intrinsic value [1]. By presenting curated or exaggerated narratives of distress, individuals attract responses from their audiences, ranging from empathetic engagement to critical scrutiny [5]. This duality highlights the paradox of online emotional expression: while it can foster connection and support, it also risks alienation or accusations of inauthenticity.

The term sadfishing was popularized in 2019 after public discourse around celebrities sharing emotionally charged content online sparked debates about their intentions [6]. The term quickly expanded to describe a broader cultural trend, encompassing everyday users who seek validation through performative suffering. This behavior raises critical questions about the boundaries between authentic self-disclosure and strategic self-presentation. While online platforms provide a space for individuals to share struggles, the dynamics of social media often incentivize exaggerated emotional displays [2].

The rise of sadfishing can be attributed to the structural dynamics of the attention economy, where digital interactions are quantified through likes, shares, and comments [1]. Social media algorithms prioritize emotionally charged content, increasing the visibility of posts that elicit strong reactions. In this context, sadfishing becomes a strategy for individuals to gain traction within their social networks. As Baker notes, the attention economy commodifies human emotion, encouraging users to adapt their behavior to maximize engagement [1].

However, this dynamic comes with significant psychological costs. Over time, the need for validation can create a dependency on external feedback, undermining individuals' self-esteem and emotional well-being [2]. Moreover, the performative nature of sadfishing can blur the line between genuine vulnerability and manipulation, leading to skepticism among audiences and, in some cases, backlash against those perceived as disingenuous [5].

The social implications of sadfishing extend beyond individual behavior, influencing the broader culture of online interaction. On one hand, sadfishing highlights the potential of social media as a platform for emotional expression and support. For individuals experiencing isolation or hardship, sharing their struggles online can provide a sense of connection and validation [3]. Online communities often serve as spaces for collective empathy, where individuals can find solace in shared experiences.

However, the trend also underscores the risks of seeking validation in an inherently performative environment. As Preece and Bannister observe, the dangers of sadfishing include the potential for exploitation, where vulnerable individuals become targets for predatory behavior [6]. Additionally, the normalization of exaggerated emotional expression can diminish the perceived authenticity of online interactions, fostering cynicism and distrust among users [5].

From a psychological perspective, sadfishing reflects the interplay between individual needs and societal pressures. For some in-

dividuals, the behavior may stem from a genuine need for support in the absence of offline resources [3]. Others may engage in sadfishing as a response to the competitive dynamics of social media, where the pressure to stand out incentivizes dramatic self-presentation [1]. This phenomenon raises important questions about the impact of digital environments on mental health, particularly among young people, who are more likely to seek validation through online platforms [2].

Sadfishing has sparked widespread cultural critique, with commentators debating its ethical and social implications. Critics argue that the behavior trivializes genuine emotional struggles, reducing them to tools for attention-seeking [7]. This critique is particularly relevant in cases where sadfishing overlaps with the broader phenomenon of performative activism, where individuals co-opt serious issues for personal gain. Conversely, defenders of sadfishing emphasize the importance of recognizing individuals' needs for connection and empathy, even if their behavior appears exaggerated [5].

Ethical considerations surrounding sadfishing also extend to the responsibilities of social media platforms. As Travers notes, the design of these platforms often exacerbates the problem by rewarding performative behavior [7]. Addressing the issue requires a multifaceted approach, including the promotion of digital literacy, the development of supportive online communities, and the implementation of algorithms that prioritize meaningful engagement over sensationalism.

Sadfishing among college students is a complex behavior driven by a mix of emotional, social, and environmental factors. It is rooted in the desire for validation, emotional support, and social connections, particularly in an environment as socially and academically demanding as college. Understanding the underlying reasons for sadfishing can help address the broader issue of emotional well-being and the role of social media in shaping students' mental health experiences.

Sadfishing is part of a broader trend of performative emotionality in the digital age, where the boundaries between public and private selves become increasingly blurred. As Williams observes, the digital era has transformed the way individuals perform and experience emotions, creating new opportunities for connection and new challenges for authenticity [3]. This shift is particularly evident in the phenomenon of sadfishing, which illustrates how digital platforms shape the ways individuals navigate their emotional lives.

In conclusion, sadfishing represents a complex interplay of individual needs, social dynamics, and technological influences. While the behavior reflects genuine desires for connection and support, it also highlights the risks of seeking validation in an environment that prioritizes visibility and engagement. By examining the phenomenon through the lenses of psychology, sociology, and media studies, researchers can better understand the cultural and psychological forces shaping online behavior. As digital environments continue to evolve, addressing the challenges posed by sadfishing will require a nuanced understanding of the interplay between personal vulnerability and performative self-presentation.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study comprised 61 college students, including 34 girls and 27 boys. The students were recruited from college student. Participants were aged around 18-23years, representing a diverse set of academic disciplines. All participants voluntarily completed an online Google Form questionnaire designed to explore perceptions and experiences related to sadfishing. Inclusion criteria required participants to be current college students with active social media usage. The study ensured anonymity, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation.

Measures

The Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire was named as sympathy seeking behaviors specifically designed for this study to

evaluate adolescents' inclination to share details about emotional struggles, feelings of being misunderstood, and interpersonal issues with the aim of eliciting sympathy and attention from their online audience. There were 19 items; e.g., "I believe in gaining attention through social media platform"; see Table 1). The items were generated based on literature of self-disclosure, online problems face by adolescent, social media self-disclosure, sadfishing, and other social media self-disclosure mechanisms. There was a pilot-testing were conducted in the process of item generation and revision. Lengthy questionnaires often lead to low response rates, high dropout rates, and reduced data quality. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness and practicality of shorter measures, including single-item scales, particularly for psychological constructs that are narrowly defined and clearly specified. Items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating higher social media sadfishing tendencies. The construct validity, factor structure, item characteristics, and internal consistency of the *Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire* were investigated in this study. There were three dimension including Attention, satisfaction/contentment and support system. Attention dimension had 4 items, likewise, satisfaction/contentment had 8 items and lastly, support system dimension had 6 items. The response options were provided on a 5-Point Likert type scale.

This is a distinct and heterogeneous student population at universities, varying by age, culture, socio-economic background, gender, and technological engagement. Such heterogeneity allows students to be fully probed in relation to sadfishing-a behavior both of individual and environmental influence.

Demographic

Age Range: It is usually university students who range between 18 and 25 years, but mature students can also be present outside this range. This falls within the range of emerging adulthood, characterized by increased self-exploration, identity development, and emotional vulnerability.

Universities tend to have students from different states and cultures, making it a good sample to understand how cultural norms shape behaviors such as sadfishing.

Gender Perspectives: Social media behaviors, including emotional expression, can differ across genders, making it essential to explore variations in sadfishing tendencies.

Technological Savviness: This age group is usually the most active users of social media, so they are an excellent population for studying online behaviors such as sadfishing.

Results

The sadfishing questionnaire was analyzed, where total number of participants were 61 in total. In which 34 were females and 27 were males. On the average, the participants were 18-22 years old. The questionnaire was analyzed into three dimensions, Attention; 4 items were evaluated to 7.3% Agree, 81% Neutral and 16% Disagree (table1). Secondly, Support System which was 8.4% Agree, 71.8% Disagree and 19.6% Neutral, (table2) Lastly, satisfaction or Contentment 11.8% Agree, 61.6% Disagree and 26.4% Neutral (table3).

Table 1: Table indicating results for Attention dimension of Sadfishing

DIMENSION	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Attention	7.3%	16%	81%

Individuals who engage in sadfishing may seek attention due to feelings of isolation, unmet emotional needs, or a desire for affirmation. The act of expressing personal struggles often leads to an explosion of positive comments and interactions as a tem-

porary means of boosting self-worth. We can see minimum group as accept it and mostly are uncertain about it [8].

Table 2: Table indicating results for Support System dimension of Sadfishing

DIMENSION	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Support system	8.4%	71.8%	19.6%

The act of sharing emotional or exaggerated personal struggles on social media—is a complex behavior often driven by the need for connection, validation, or empathy. Many individuals turn to social media as a platform to express feelings they may struggle to share in face-to-face settings. The act of sharing emotional content can serve as a coping mechanism or an implicit cry for help. According to a study by Moreno et al. [9], adolescents often use social platforms to seek validation and support from peers when dealing with mental health challenges. As you can see few percent of student agree with it. Attention- and sympathy-seeking posts can create a kind of community and understanding from the followers. Such posts, however, can sometimes lose authenticity. Meier & Schäfer [10] explained how likes, comments, and shares become a feedback loop reinforcing this behavior in exploring the effects of social media on emotional regulation.

Table 3: Table indicating results for Satisfaction dimension of Sadfishing

DIMENSION	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Satisfaction	11.8%	61.6%	26.4%

The emotional gratification individuals may derive from the attention, empathy, or validation received after sharing personal struggles or emotional posts online. While the intent behind sadfishing may vary, the resulting satisfaction often stems from fulfilling psychological and social needs. Posting emotionally charged content can become an outlet for pent-up feelings. Online expressions of the struggles provide a sense of catharsis, leading to a short-term relief of the emotions. Bazarova et al. [11] believe that self-disclosure on social media often leads to immediate psychological benefits, especially if it triggers positive responses. Certain number of student do feel like social media makes them satisfied. They include likes, comments, or private messages between other users and are a validation mechanism that confirms this person's emotions or experiences. Validation through such interactions can enhance self-esteem and foster a sense of belonging. Choi & Sung [12] indicate that positive feedback of emotional posts is linked to increased satisfaction and social support perception.

Table 4: Table indicating results for overall dimension of Sadfishing

DIMENSION	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Overall	9.7%	69%	21.8%

The study showed a strong college student inclination towards sadfishing as a way to solicit sympathy, even though most participants reported not wanting to do such personally. There was also an indication of some gender gap, as more females reported more frequency of emotional struggle posts on social media compared to their male peers yet still, the vast majority of participants felt that they are not deliberately seeking sympathy by exaggerating emotions. These findings partially support, which suggests that women are more likely to use social media for emotional expression. However, the current study suggests that sadfishing is not as prevalent as popular media would have one believe, as most students rejected it as a common practice.

This would entail a level of social influence from those media channels as their prompt responds in terms of likes, comments, and even shares serve to reinforce said behaviors which could entice some participants toward sadfishing. Still, most of the student population was quick to reject the claim that they post distressing, personal experiences merely as a ruse for gaining the spotlight in this way. These results challenge the assumption that sympathy-seeking behavior is pervasive among all college students and that there are individual differences and varying motivations for online self-expression.

The results further indicate that the phenomenon of sadfishing may originate primarily from unfulfilled emotional requirements in a minority of individuals, rather than representing a prevalent social standard. While certain students might engage in sadfishing as a strategy for coping or to obtain affirmation, the overall disapproval of this behavior among the majority underscores a possible stigma or adverse perception associated with exaggerated expressions of emotion on social media platforms.

Despite its insights, the study has limitations. The sampling only included people in colleges, meaning generalizability was limited to other populations. Self-reporting bias may be another factor that affects responses because participants underreported socially undesirable behaviors. Sadfishing behavior should therefore be longitudinally explored to understand its change over time and to study cultural and platform-specific factors that impact these behaviors. These findings bring a nuanced perspective to sadfishing and sympathy-seeking activities, indicating that they do take place although much more rarely than widely believed. If a larger number of students had participated, the results might have been different.

Discussion

Sadfishing studies, especially among college students, have a number of limitations that undermine the validity and generalizability of findings. One key limitation is sample representativeness since studies are conducted on narrow groups, for instance, university students, who might not be representative of broader demographic or cultural contexts. For instance, university students tend to fall within a very specific age range [18–25] and might overrepresent tech-savvy individuals, meaning findings might not be generalizable to other ages or less digitally literate groups. Another concern is self-report biases, whereby participants might underreport manipulative behaviors or inflate struggles to garner more sympathy. This complicates verifying authenticity of motivation behind sadfishing. Furthermore, the absence of longitudinal data makes it hard to understand the dynamic nature of sadfishing behavior over time. Most studies rely on cross-sectional designs, measuring a single snapshot in time instead of long-term effects, for instance, whether sadfishing promotes social connection or exacerbates mental health issues. Moreover, contextual and cultural variation makes interpretation of sadfishing challenging, given that emotional expression norms vary between cultures; acceptable behaviors in one context might be condemned in another. Researchers are also confronted with ethical and privacy issues, especially when studying social media content, since it might be difficult to obtain informed consent even for publicly available data. Finally, the absence of a standardized definition and criteria for defining sadfishing introduces subjectivity into data collection and analysis. To mitigate these challenges, future studies need to utilize varied, longitudinal samples, consider cultural contexts, and come up with more precise frameworks for defining and measuring sadfishing.

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