

Sadfishing or emotional baiting: The pursuit of interaction and followers through emotional posts on social media

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Abstract: This study examines the phenomenon of “sadfishing,” defined as the exaggerated sharing of emotional content on social media to attract attention. Sadfishing involves users amplifying feelings of sadness or stress to garner empathy or support from online communities. As this phenomenon grows, it has become a popular strategy among both young people and adults as they shape their online identities. The study explores the impacts of sadfishing on social media users, its psychological consequences, and the potential long-term effects on social relationships. While sadfishing evokes empathy, it also raises questions about authenticity and invites humorous criticism. In this context, the study aims to investigate the potential risks associated with emotional manipulation and exaggerated sharing on social media and their impact on digital interaction dynamics. The research analyzes sadfishing-related posts from the TikTok user @burcemiiyy using a qualitative research method, specifically netnographic analysis. This analysis evaluates user comments under four main themes: Empathy and Supportive Comments, Questioning Sincerity, Humorous and Satirical Reactions, and Advice and Guidance Comments. The findings reveal that social media users respond to sadfishing content in various ways, and these posts can trigger diverse social and psychological dynamics. These results suggest that sadfishing content generates effects not only on an individual level but also on a societal level, providing a new perspective within the context of social media ethics and digital citizenship.

Keywords: Digital empathy, Emotional manipulation, Sadness hunting, Social media.

1. Introduction

According to We Are Social's 2024 analysis, the number of internet users increased by 1.8% compared to 2023, reaching a total of 5.35 billion people with 97 million new users. The study revealed that Turkey ranked 36th globally in terms of internet adoption, with 86.5% of its total population using the internet. The proportion of active social media users in Turkey corresponds to 66.8% of the population [1]. Furthermore, among all age groups, the 16–24 age range stands out in terms of time spent on the internet. As of 2024, the five most time-consuming social media platforms worldwide are TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. On TikTok, content shared with the hashtag POV (point of view) has reached over 1 trillion views, with drama and tragedy genres frequently preferred. This is thought to be linked to the fact that content evoking feelings of pity tends to receive more engagement.

The social media environment has fostered a culture of oversharing and emotional excess, leading to the blurring of individuals' personal boundaries. Benites [2] defines this phenomenon as “informativization,” where everyday life experiences are turned into digital content and subsequently transformed into economic value. This digital transformation process has resulted in the erosion of privacy and has created a structure in which social media platforms exploit individuals' emotional

expressions for commercial gain. Within this context, the phenomenon of "sadfishing"—the exaggerated or manipulative display of personal pain and struggles—has become increasingly prevalent.

The term was coined in 2019 by journalist and writer Rebecca Reid. Reid defines sadfishing as the act of sharing sensitive, emotional, and personal content online in order to gain the sympathy and interest of an online community. Individuals who engage in sadfishing maximize the drama of their circumstances, creating an emotional "clickbait." Reid first used the term after Kendall Jenner spoke about her personal issues in a 2019 video. This video, also shared by her mother Kris Jenner, created an expectation among viewers of a traumatic personal story. However, when it was revealed that the video was part of a commercial collaboration with the skincare brand Proactiv, Reid labeled the act as "sadfishing" [3].

Sadfishing has become a popular phenomenon, especially among young people [4]. The term refers to the act of individuals deliberately sharing their emotional or personal problems in detail on social media in order to attract sympathy and attention from online communities [5, 6]. This behavior is often rooted in various underlying factors such as anxiety, depression, attention-seeking tendencies, and a perceived lack of social support. Research has shown that sadfishing may have psychological consequences and that this behavior is associated with a habit of seeking validation and support from others online [7, 8].

On September 3, 2019, famous American pop star Justin Bieber made a post on his personal Instagram account about his mental health struggles, which was criticized by some as an example of sadfishing. However, *The Guardian* emphasized that not every post in which people share their struggles should be labeled as sadfishing and that such calls for help should be responded to with sensitivity [9]. On the other hand, according to a 2020 report by *The Independent*, YouTuber Jason Ethier, known as JayStation, claimed in a video that his girlfriend had died, despite her actually being alive. In the video, he tearfully announced her death, later producing content that included visiting her grave and attempting to summon her spirit. When the truth came out, this was widely regarded as an instance of sadfishing aimed at exploiting viewers' emotional responses [10].

According to Gillis [11] from *Choosing Therapy*, sadfishing is defined as the act of sharing personal stories and images on social media to gain attention and sympathy. Core factors contributing to sadfishing include loneliness, depression, anxiety, narcissism, low self-esteem, weak social support, substance use, and a need for psychological support. It is also reported to be associated with negative self-perception and mental health issues.

Before the widespread use of social media, individuals typically shared their emotional struggles only with close friends or family, and it was generally considered inappropriate to disclose such matters to strangers. However, with the rise of social media, especially among young people, the tendency to express negative emotions publicly has become more common [7]. In this context, Wyatt [12] discusses the concept of "toxic positivity" on social media. This term describes the pressure individuals feel to maintain a constantly optimistic image. This social shift leads to the suppression of negative emotions, which contrasts sharply with the overt sadness characteristic of sadfishing. Both behaviors reflect how social media influences emotional expression and indicate that excessive emotional suppression or performative sensitivity can have negative consequences for mental health [12].

In some contexts, sadfishing has also been used for strategic purposes. For instance, in countries like China, citizens have been observed using sadfishing as a strategy to influence political elites, hold them accountable, and raise awareness of public concerns [13]. Additionally, sadfishing behavior among university students has been linked to denial mechanisms, attention-seeking tendencies, and online posts made under the influence of alcohol [14]. These findings underscore the complex effects of sadfishing on individuals' online identities and their interactions on social media.

Sadfishing has become a widespread phenomenon, especially on platforms like TikTok, where users share exaggerated or emotional content to reach broader audiences and increase engagement. Nahari and Susanti [15] observed that users deliberately post dramatic or sorrowful content as a means of

going viral and gaining recognition on social media. This finding supports the idea that viral content often relies on eliciting emotional responses from viewers [15].

The psychological motivations behind sadfishing are multifaceted. Rendy, et al. [16] noted that users who engage in sadfishing often experience loneliness, low self-esteem, and anxiety, and view digital validation as a coping mechanism. Furthermore, this behavior is linked to a lack of tangible social support. While such actions may offer short-term emotional relief, they can also lead individuals to become dependent on digital interactions to meet their emotional needs Rendy, et al. [16]. Petrofes [17] defined sadfishing as "the tendency of social media users to exaggerate their emotional state to gain sympathy." Their research demonstrated that individuals with an anxious attachment style are particularly inclined toward sadfishing when they feel a lack of adequate social support.

Saputra, et al. [18] argued that social media posts about mental health issues can also be considered within the scope of sadfishing. In their study, they found that some content creators attempt to gain sympathy and increase view counts by portraying individuals with mental health problems in a negative light. This can lead to the misrepresentation of people with mental illnesses and reinforce discriminatory attitudes in society. It is crucial to remember that individuals with mental health challenges are capable of studying and working just like anyone else.

Online sharing of emotional content can serve as a form of expression and connection for individuals. However, there are significant concerns about the potential negative outcomes of sadfishing. These include the risks of stigma, discrimination, and violations of privacy, particularly for individuals with mental health conditions [18]. Therefore, it is evident that content involving sadfishing must be created with ethical and social responsibility in mind.

In this study, the phenomenon of sadfishing on social media is examined in detail, focusing on how it emerges, why individuals engage in such behavior, and its individual and societal impacts. The research explores how sadfishing has evolved into a strategy to gain sympathy or attention from online communities and investigates the potential harms of this strategy. The psychological effects of sadfishing on individuals and its long-term implications for social relationships were analyzed using netnographic methods, based on data collected from a user account on TikTok. Comments were categorized under four main themes, revealing that sadfishing content elicited diverse reactions from users, ranging from empathy and support to questions of authenticity and humorous responses.

2. Method

This study employs a netnographic method to investigate the phenomenon of "sadfishing" on social media, defined as users sharing emotional content with the aim of increasing engagement. Netnography is an ethnographic research approach used to analyze content shared in online communities and social media platforms, making it a suitable tool for understanding how users respond to such content [19].

2.1. Data Collection

The data source for this study includes sadfishing-related videos shared by the TikTok user @burcemiyyy and the user comments on these videos. Permission was obtained from the owner of the account. The follower and like counts of the @burcemiyyy account suggest that the user aims for high engagement. One specific video, numbered 7329140314160106757, was selected as a representative example of sadfishing content and analyzed in detail. In the video, the content creator expresses that beneath the surface of an energetic lifestyle lies deep emotional struggle, which evoked empathy and support among viewers. The comments on such sadfishing content were systematically categorized for analysis.

2.2. Data Analysis

The comments were analyzed under four main thematic categories:

1. Empathy and Supportive Comments
2. Authenticity and Sincerity Concerns

3. Sarcastic and Humorous Responses
4. Advice and Suggestion-Based Comments

This categorization allowed for a deeper understanding of how users react to emotional content on social media.

2.3. Ethical Approval and Privacy

This study was conducted using publicly available content on TikTok, and permission was obtained from the account owner. To protect user privacy, all comments were anonymized, no personal information was used, and data collection was carried out in accordance with ethical guidelines [19]. This approach enables a better understanding of how sadfishing content affects social media users and the variety of responses it elicits.

3. Findings

The TikTok account with the username *burcemiyyy* has 3,501 followers and a total of 1 million likes, while following only 127 accounts. Although the follower count is relatively low, the high number of likes suggests that the user's content occasionally goes viral or receives intense engagement. This indicates that the *burcemiyyy* account likely aims to reach a wider audience and achieve high engagement through emotionally charged or attention-grabbing content.

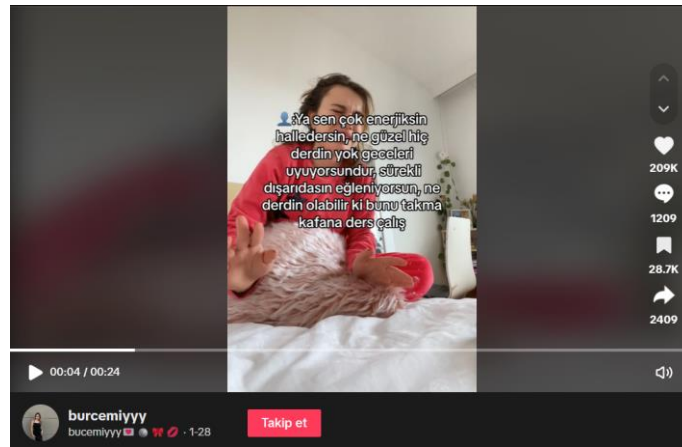


Figure 1.
A Sadfishing Video from the Account @burcemiyyy (TikTok, 2024).

The TikTok video with the ID number 7329140314160106757, shared by the user @burcemiyyy, is the most-viewed content on the profile, with a total of 2.1 million views. This post serves as an example of the phenomenon known as “sadfishing,” where emotional content is shared on social media to boost engagement. In the video, the user expresses that despite appearing to lead an energetic and carefree life, she is actually experiencing deep emotional struggles. Such content aims to increase engagement by eliciting empathy and support from viewers.

3.1. Comment Analysis

3.1.1. Empathy and Support Comments

Some users responded with empathetic and supportive comments toward the content creator's emotional state. For example:

- “We wouldn't dare to love, but some people make others cry 😞” — this comment shows a user sharing in the content creator's sadness and offering support.

- “Poor thing, look at those tears 😭” — another user expresses empathy in an attempt to console the creator.
- These kinds of comments reflect that viewers feel emotionally connected to sadfishing content and attempt to uplift the creator by sharing in their difficult experience. The intended outcome of sadfishing—drawing attention and receiving empathy—is met through such supportive messages.

3.1.2. Authenticity Concerns

Some users, however, questioned the authenticity of the emotional display. For instance:

- “How can y’all record a video at times like this, tell me?” — this comment challenges whether such an emotional moment is genuine.
- “Everyone’s good at crying for the camera these days” — this remark criticizes the content as possibly being emotional manipulation.
- These comments reflect the ambivalence some users feel about sadfishing and suggest that such posts may be perceived as strategic attempts to gain attention.

3.1.3. Sarcastic and Humorous Reactions

Other users responded with sarcasm and humor:

- “Sis, why are you crying?” and “I hope she’s not my crush’s ex lol” — these comments reduce the seriousness of the content and mock it in a playful tone.
- “Even girls with baby blonde hair cry these days 😏” — this is another example of humor that undermines the emotional weight of the post. These types of responses indicate that sadfishing content is not always taken seriously and can become a subject of online satire.

3.1.4. Advice and Encouragement Comments:

Some users offered advice or encouraging messages to the content creator:

- “Why do you wear yourself out for people who don’t deserve it?” — this comment advises the creator to protect her emotional well-being.
- “You’re beautiful, why are you doing this to yourself? There are millions of people out there—try to be strong” — this message attempts to boost the creator’s morale and motivate her to stay strong.
- These comments not only provide emotional support but also suggest solutions or mindset changes to help the content creator cope with her distress.

4. Discussion

This study analyzes the impact of the sadfishing phenomenon on social media users through a netnographic approach, revealing various social and psychological dynamics. The findings demonstrate that the effects of sadfishing content on individuals and communities are multifaceted. Comments on sadfishing content were analyzed using a netnographic method and classified into four main categories: Empathy and Support Comments, Authenticity Concerns, Sarcastic and Humorous Reactions, and Advice and Encouragement Comments. These findings are discussed in comparison with existing literature on the sadfishing phenomenon.

Firstly, sadfishing content appears to have the potential to trigger empathy and support among users. A significant portion of users responded to sadfishing posts with supportive and empathetic comments, indicating that such content can foster a sense of solidarity within online communities [16]. However, it has also been noted that this sense of solidarity may reinforce individuals’ tendencies to seek constant validation through their online identities, potentially leading to psychological dependency [8]. While empathetic content may help social media users build mutual support systems, it may also encourage excessive emotional sharing [4].

The “Empathy and Support Comments” theme identified in this study aligns with existing literature that highlights the emotional impact of sadfishing on users. Gillis [11] notes that sadfishing is often used by individuals on social media—particularly those struggling with loneliness, depression, and anxiety—as a way to attract attention and empathy. The findings of this study similarly show that some users expressed emotional closeness and left supportive comments on sadfishing content, supporting Gillis [11] observations. Additionally, Petrofes, et al. [8] define sadfishing as “the tendency to exaggerate emotional states in order to gain sympathy,” emphasizing the potential of such content to evoke empathy among social media users. In our study, the fact that several users responded sensitively and supportively to sadfishing posts further highlights this empathetic dimension of the phenomenon.

However, the “Authenticity Concerns” category among our findings reveals that the sincerity of sadfishing content is frequently questioned by social media users. In the literature, Reid [20] states that sadfishing is often used manipulatively, with emotional elements exaggerated to capture users’ attention. The fact that some users in our study expressed doubts about the authenticity of sadfishing content and questioned whether these posts were genuine aligns with Reid’s findings. For instance, comments such as *“How can you even record a video like this?”* reflect the skepticism and emotional distance with which social media users often view sadfishing posts. This indicates a widespread distrust toward the authenticity of sadfishing content on social platforms. Thirdly, the comments categorized under “Sarcastic and Humorous Reactions” in our study are consistent with previous research highlighting varied user responses to sadfishing. Saputra, et al. [18] observed that some social media users do not take sadfishing content seriously and often treat such posts in a mocking or dismissive manner. In our study, users similarly posted humorous remarks that diminished the dramatic tone of the content, supporting [18]. Comments such as *“Sis, why are you crying?”* reflect a tendency to trivialize sadfishing and approach it with a sarcastic tone. This suggests that some users perceive sadfishing as exaggerated or amusing and respond with ridicule.

Finally, the “Advice and Encouragement Comments” category in our study demonstrates that users adopt a supportive yet guiding approach toward sadfishing content. This finding aligns with Kozinets [21] observations through the use of netnography, where he noted that in online communities, some users offer uplifting and directive messages to individuals sharing emotional experiences. Likewise, in our study, certain users encouraged the content creator to stay strong and shared motivating messages aimed at helping them cope.

Overall, the findings of our study indicate that sadfishing content on social media elicits a wide range of user responses. While some users respond with empathy and support, others question the authenticity of such content or take a humorous stance. This highlights the diversity of perceptions and reactions that sadfishing provokes on social media platforms and affirms the complexity of the phenomenon as reflected in the literature. The study contributes to a broader understanding of sadfishing in the context of social media ethics and opens avenues for developing new approaches to better understand human behavior in the digital age.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the sadfishing phenomenon within the context of social media through a netnographic analysis of user interactions with emotionally charged content. By analyzing comments on a high-engagement TikTok post by the user @burcemiy, the research identified four main categories of user reactions: Empathy and Supportive Comments, Authenticity Concerns, Sarcastic and Humorous Reactions, and Advice and Encouragement Comments. These categories not only reflect the diverse ways in which users respond to emotional content online but also reveal the multilayered psychological and social dynamics embedded within digital interactions.

The findings demonstrate that sadfishing can foster emotional connection and online solidarity, yet it simultaneously provokes skepticism and even ridicule, indicating that social media users do not passively consume emotional content—they critically engage with it. The empathy shown by many users suggests that sadfishing can function as a tool for receiving digital support, particularly among

individuals experiencing loneliness or mental health struggles. However, the frequent questioning of sincerity points to a growing awareness of emotional manipulation online and the performative aspects of digital identities. Additionally, the presence of sarcastic and humorous reactions reveals that not all users interpret sadfishing content with emotional seriousness, which can undermine the original intent of the posts. Meanwhile, comments offering guidance and motivation highlight that users not only engage emotionally but also attempt to provide direction and solutions, contributing to a form of peer counseling or informal digital mentorship.

Overall, the study underscores the complexity of sadfishing as a digital phenomenon. While it may fulfill users' emotional needs for validation and connection, it also carries risks of overexposure, misrepresentation, and dependency on online approval. The study contributes to the broader discourse on social media ethics, digital emotional labor, and performative vulnerability, and it emphasizes the need for a more responsible and reflective approach to emotional sharing in digital environments.

As social media continues to evolve as a primary space for emotional expression and identity construction, understanding phenomena like sadfishing becomes crucial in navigating the ethical and psychological challenges of the digital age. Future research should further explore the implications of emotional performativity in other platforms and cultural contexts to develop more comprehensive frameworks for interpreting and responding to digital emotional content.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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