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Turkish Adaptation of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire in High School Students and Its Psychosocial Correlates

Lise Öğrencilerinde Sosyal Medya Sadfishing (Hüzün Avcılığı) Anketi'nin Türkçe Uyarlaması ve Psikososyal İlişkileri

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ABSTRACT

Objective: With the increasing use of social media, adolescents are more likely to share their emotions and personal experiences in online environments. Sadfishing—defined as posting exaggerated or misleading negative content to attract attention and sympathy—has recently attracted scholarly interest. However, empirical evidence on its prevalence and psychosocial correlates among Turkish high school students remains limited. This study aimed to examine the psychometric properties of the Turkish version of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire, determine the prevalence of sadfishing among high school students in Erzurum, and explore its associations with social media addiction and psychosocial difficulties.

Methods: The Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire was translated into Turkish using forward–backward translation and expert review. Linguistic equivalence was tested in a bilingual sample. The final version was administered online to 106 high school students together with the Social Media Addiction Scale for Adolescents and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the factorial structure. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's α, McDonald's ω, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Criterion-related validity was assessed via correlations with social media addiction and psychosocial variables.

Results: Overall sadfishing levels were low. CFA supported a unidimensional structure with excellent model fit (CFI=.998, TLI=.995, RMSEA=.061), and factor loadings were high (λ=.93–.97). The scale showed very high internal consistency (α and ω > .97), strong CR (≈ .98), and high AVE (≈ .91). Sadfishing was positively correlated with social media addiction (r=.27, *P*<.01). Social media addiction was moderately associated with emotional problems, internalizing and externalizing difficulties, and hyperactivity. No gender differences were observed in sadfishing, whereas girls reported higher social media addiction scores.

Conclusion: The Turkish version of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire demonstrated strong psychometric properties. Although sadfishing levels were generally low, its associations with social media addiction and psychosocial difficulties suggest links with emotional vulnerability and online coping. These findings underscore the importance of emotional skills, supportive relationships, and digital literacy in fostering healthier online behaviors among adolescents.

Keywords: Sadfishing, adolescents, social media addiction, hyperactivity, emotional problems

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ÖZ

Amaç: Sosyal medyanın yaygın kullanımıyla birlikte, ergenler duygularını ve kişisel deneyimlerini giderek daha fazla çevrimiçi ortamda paylaşmaktadır. Sadfishing (hüzün avcılığı), dikkat ve sempati uyandırmak amacıyla abartılı veya yanıltıcı olumsuz içerik yayınlamayı ifade eder. Bu davranış son yıllarda dikkat çekmiş olsa da, Türkiye'deki lise öğrencileri arasında yaygınlığı ve psikososyal ilişkileri hakkında çok az şey bilinmektedir. Bu çalışma, Sosyal Medya Sadfishing Anketi'nin Türkçe versiyonunun psikometrik özelliklerini incelemeyi ve psikososyal zorluklarla ilişkilerini araştırmayı amaçlamıştır.

Yöntemler: Sosyal Medya Sadfishing Anketi ileri-geri çeviri ve uzman değerlendirme yöntemiyle Türkçeye uyarlanmıştır. Dilsel eşdeğerlik, iki dilli bir örneklemde doğrulandı. Son hali, 106 lise öğrencisine, Ergenler için Sosyal Medya Bağımlılığı Ölçeği ve Güçlü Yönler ve Zorluklar Anketi ile birlikte çevrimiçi olarak uygulandı. Faktör yapısını test etmek için doğrulayıcı faktör analizi (CFA) yapıldı. Güvenilirlik, Cronbach'ın α'sı, McDonald'ın ω'sı, bileşik güvenilirlik (CR) ve ortalama varyans çıkarımı (AVE) kullanılarak incelendi. Kriterle ilgili geçerlilik, sosyal medya bağımlılığı ve psikososyal değişkenlerle korelasyonlar yoluyla değerlendirildi.

Bulgular: Genel olarak, sosyal medyada hüzün avcılığı düzeyleri düşüktü. Doğrulayıcı faktör analizi (CFA), mükemmel model uyumuyla tek boyutlu bir yapıyı destekledi (CFI=,998, TLI=,995, RMSEA=,061) ve faktör yükleri yüksekti (λ=,93–,97). Ölçek çok yüksek iç tutarlılık (α ve ω > ,97), güçlü CR (≈ ,98) ve yüksek AVE (≈ ,91) gösterdi. Hüzün avcılığı, sosyal medya bağımlılığı ile pozitif korelasyon gösterdi (r=,27, *P*<,01). Sosyal medya bağımlılığı, duygusal sorunlar, içselleştirme ve dışsallaştırma güçlükleri ve hiperaktivite ile orta düzeyde ilişkiliydi. Hüzün avcılığı düzeyleri açısından cinsiyetler arasında anlamlı bir fark bulunmazken, kızlar daha yüksek sosyal medya bağımlılığı puanları bildirdi.

Sonuç: Sosyal Medya Sadfishing Anketi'nin Türkçe versiyonu güçlü psikometrik özellikler sergilemiştir. Sadfishing düzeyleri genel olarak düşük olsa da, sosyal medya bağımlılığı ve psikososyal zorluklarla olan ilişkisi, duygusal kırılganlık ve çevrimiçi başa çıkma mekanizmalarıyla bağlantılı olduğunu düşündürmektedir. Bu bulgular, ölçeğin ergen araştırmalarında kullanımını desteklemekte ve daha sağlıklı çevrimiçi davranışları teşvik etmede duygusal becerilerin, destekleyici ilişkilerin ve dijital okuryazarlığın önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hüzün avcılığı, ergenler, sosyal medya bağımlılığı, hiperaktivite, duygusal sorunlar

INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements and the growing accessibility of the internet have rendered social media platforms powerful tools for communication and content dissemination. Prominent platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), LinkedIn, and Snapchat function as platforms for personal expression and communication, providing adolescents with spaces to articulate and share their emotional experiences. However, problematic internet use has become increasingly prevalent among young people, with the pursuit of followers and "likes" sometimes leading to maladaptive or unethical behaviors.[1,2] Within this context, sadfishing—the act of dramatizing or exaggerating emotional distress to elicit sympathy—has emerged as a noteworthy phenomenon. While such behaviors may reflect genuine help-seeking, they also carry risks, including privacy breaches, cyberbullying, and exploitation. Understanding the psychological predictors of sadfishing is therefore critical, particularly in adolescent populations where emotional vulnerability and social media reliance are pronounced.[3]

The term sadfishing was coined by British journalist Rebecca Reid by combining the expression catfish—used to describe someone who deceives others online, often by concealing their true identity—with the word sad.[3] It refers to online behaviors in which individuals dramatize or exaggerate emotional distress to gain sympathy. Survey data suggest that more than 70% of young people are not fully transparent about their online and social media activities.[4]

Contemporary adolescents increasingly seek validation and social support through online environments rather than traditional face-to-face interactions. For many adolescents, receiving support through online platforms is perceived as easier than seeking help from parents or loved ones. This tendency contributes to the prevalence of sadfishing behaviors among young people. However, distinguishing between posts that are genuine help-seeking efforts and those intended purely for attention is not always straightforward. Research indicates that posts aimed at eliciting support tend to receive significantly more comments. While online communication tools have facilitated interpersonal connections, they have also raised concerns regarding potential negative outcomes. Studies have linked sadfishing-related behaviors to loneliness, depression, anxiety, personality disorders, narcissism, low self-esteem, substance use, and poor social support.[5]

The act of expressing one's feelings to others and thus revealing oneself has a reciprocal relationship with psychological well-being and is influenced by many factors. It can vary in frequency, duration, and depth, as well as in quality dimensions such as accuracy, intent, and valence.[6] However, sadfishing may increase vulnerability to privacy

breaches and cyberbullying, and in some cases, to harassment, stalking, or even blackmail. Conceptually, sadfishing may be seen as an exploitation of loneliness and the need for affection, and has been associated with histrionic and narcissistic personality traits, manipulative attitudes (Machiavellianism), anxious attachment styles, and lower perceived interpersonal social support.[7] For influencers or celebrities, such behaviors may be motivated by economic or promotional goals, whereas on a personal level, they may reflect underlying emotional difficulties or a need for sympathy.

Social media behaviors are often driven by individuals' attempts to obtain emotional, social, informational, and instrumental support.[4,8] Equating this behavior solely with attention-seeking and regarding it merely as a manipulative tool for controlling social interactions may undermine genuine coping or help-seeking efforts, and may even increase vulnerability to bullying and deception.

While such posts may reduce stigma around help-seeking and challenge the culture of silence surrounding unhappiness, they are unlikely to improve or alleviate mental health symptoms. Ideally, the desired social support network should come from real-life connections and, when necessary, mental health professionals. Negative reactions to sadfishing posts can have particularly harmful psychological consequences for emotionally vulnerable youth. Moreover, extensive online sharing of personal fears and concerns may increase adolescents' susceptibility to exploitation by predators.[3]

Given these risks, understanding the psychological predictors of sadfishing is critical. Identifying associated mental health markers may facilitate early detection of disorders such as depression and anxiety through social indicators. The present study is intended as a preliminary step toward such an understanding, with a particular focus on high school students in Türkiye—a population for which no prior research on this topic has been identified.

METHODS

Study Design and Participants

A cross-sectional study was conducted to investigate the prevalence of sadfishing among high school students and its associations with social media addiction and psychosocial variables. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ataturk University Non-Interventional Clinical Research Ethics Committee (Date: 31.01.2025, Number: B.30.2.ATA.0.01.00/175) and informed consent was secured from both participants and their guardians. The study sample comprised 106 students from a private high school in Erzurum, Türkiye.

Measures included the Turkish adaptation of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire, the Social Media Addiction Scale for Adolescents, and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Data were collected via online surveys and analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability indices, confirmatory factor analysis, and correlation analyses to assess psychometric properties and construct validity.

Measures

Sociodemographic and Social Media Use Form: A brief questionnaire was developed by the researchers to collect sociodemographic information and patterns of social media use among participants. The items were generated based on a review of the relevant literature on adolescent social media behaviors and mental health. The form included questions regarding age, gender, grade level, family structure, daily social media use duration, and primary purposes of social media use.

The Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire: The scale was originally developed by Zsila et al.[5] to assess the frequency of sadfishing behaviors. In this study, the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire was used to assess adolescents' tendency to share difficulties in emotional and interpersonal relationships in order to gain the sympathy and attention of their online communities. The original scale was designed as an eight-item, five-point Likert-type instrument in which higher scores indicate greater sadfishing tendencies on social media. In this modified version (item 3, 4, 5, 6, 8), the questionnaire demonstrated excellent content validity with an S-CVI/Ave value of 0.91. The internal consistency of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire with the remaining items was excellent (5 items; α=0.85, 95% CI=[0.82, 0.87]). EFA results showed a single-factor structure of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire, explaining 63.01% of the total variance. For this study, permission to translate and adapt the scale into Turkish was obtained from the original author via e-mail.

Social Media Addiction Scale for Adolescents: The Social Media Addiction Scale for Adolescents is a 13-item, five-point Likert-type scale developed to measure problematic social media use. Internal consistency for the Turkish version was high (Cronbach's α=0.869), with an explained variance of 58.89%, indicating strong reliability and validity.[9]

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire – Adolescent Form (SDQ): The SDQ, developed by Goodman, is a widely used screening tool for emotional and behavioral problems in children and adolescents. The scale assesses psychological difficulties as emotional symptoms, hyperactivity/attention deficit, behavioral problems, peer problems, and strengths as prosocial behavior subscales. Total difficulties can also be grouped as internalization (emotional and peer problems) and externalization (hyperactivity and behavioral problems). The Turkish adaptation of the SDQ has demonstrated good reliability and validity.[10]

Procedure

The finalized Turkish version of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire, the Social Media Addiction Scale for Adolescents, and the SDQ were administered online via Google Forms to the study sample.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using the Jamovi software (version 2.3.26). Descriptive statistics, including means, medians, standard deviations, ranges (minimum–maximum), skewness, and kurtosis values, were computed for all variables. Normality was evaluated based on skewness and kurtosis values, with values within ±2 considered indicative of acceptable distributional properties. Group differences were assessed using independent samples t-tests. Linguistic equivalence between the original and translated versions was evaluated using paired samples t-tests to assess mean differences between Time 1 and Time 2 scores and Pearson correlation analyses. Construct validity of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire was assessed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test, Bartlett's test of sphericity. The psychometric properties of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire were examined through internal consistency analyses (Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω) for reliability, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for factorial/construct validity, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) for convergent validity, and Pearson correlation analyses with related measures for criterion/convergent validity.

RESULTS

Participant Characteristics

The sample consisted of 106 students: 69 females (65.1%), 37 males (34.9%). Most participants (n=93) lived in a nuclear family, followed by six in single-parent households, five in an extended family, and two in a student dormitory.

By grade level, 42 students (39.6%) were in preparatory class, 39 (36.8%) in 9th grade, 19 (17.9%) in 10th grade, and 6 (5.7%) in 11th grade.

Social Media Use

The mean daily duration of social media use was approximately 125 minutes (SD=73.87), ranging from 13 to 360 minutes.

The most common purposes for using social media were:

- Entertainment (80.6%)
- Messaging (65.3%)
- Communication (61.1%)
- Listening to music (61.1%)
- Following current events (59.7%)
- Passing time (50.0%)
- Accessing information (45.8%)
- Reaching people (34.7%)
- Sharing personal information (15.3%)
- Meeting new people (22.2%)
- Exchanging ideas (22.2%)

Sadfishing Questionnaire Results

On the 5-item Sadfishing Questionnaire, the majority of responses were "strongly disagree." The highest agreement rate was 17.1% on certain items ("strongly agree"). Overall sadfishing scores were relatively low, with most participants reporting minimal engagement in posting negative experiences online to seek sympathy.

Figure 1 illustrates that the majority of students selected "strongly disagree," confirming that sadfishing behaviors were relatively uncommon in this sample.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Table 1. The mean score for sadfishing was 9.43 (SD=6.58), for social media addiction 29.93 (SD=8.49), and for SDQ total difficulties 12.10 (SD=4.94). Externalizing and internalizing subscale means were 6.40 (SD=2.93) and 5.70 (SD=3.18), respectively.

Skewness and kurtosis values ranged between −1.03 and 1.62, indicating acceptable normality according to commonly recommended cut-off criteria (±2), suggesting that parametric analyses were appropriate.

As shown in Table 1, mean sadfishing scores were considerably lower than social media addiction scores, suggesting that while problematic social media use was more prevalent, sadfishing remained less frequent.

Gender Comparisons

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine group differences. A significant group difference with moderate to large effect sizes was found in the total social media scores according to Cohen's (1988) criteria (0.20=small, 0.50=medium, 0.80=large). Social media addiction scores were significantly higher in girls (M=31.00, SD=8.19) than in boys (M=24.97, SD=6.87) (t=3.811, df=104, P<.001, Cohen's d=−0.78). Statistically significant differences were seen in the virtual pleasure and functional impairment subscores of the scale (t(104)=−4.84, P<.001, d=−0.99, and t(104)=−3.63, P<.001, d=−0.74, respectively).

Gender comparisons revealed no differences in sadfishing, but female students reported significantly higher social media addiction scores.

Mean prosocial behavior and SDQ total difficulties scores were statistically significantly higher in girls than in boys

(t(104)=−2.75, p=.007, d=−0.56, and t(104)=−2.47, *P*=.015, d=−0.50, respectively). All other variables showed non-significant differences with small or negligible effect sizes.

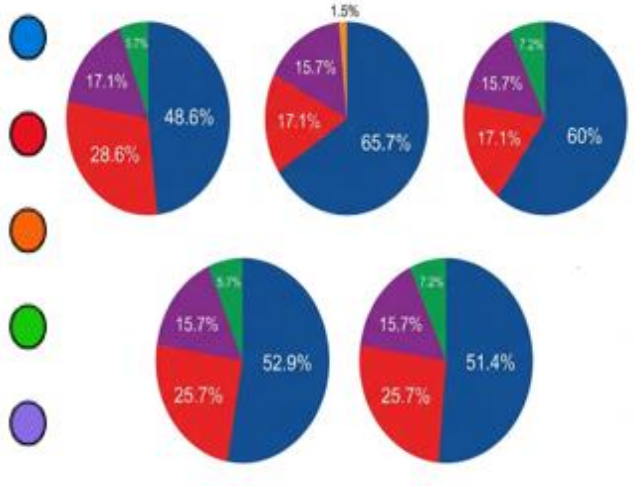

Figure 1. Pie charts of Sadfishing survey responses for each question with Likert scale options ("1.Blue-Strongly Disagree," "2.Red-Disagree," "3.Orange-Neutral," "4. Green-Agree," "5. Purple-Strongly Agree").

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Scales

Scale / Subscale	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Sadfishing total	9.43	6.0	6.58	5	25	1.62	1.29
Social media addiction	29.93	29.0	8.49	13	59	0.58	1.39
SDQ-Total	12.10	12.0	4.94	1	24	0.32	-0.30

Validity Analysis

Linguistic validity was ensured through translation-back translation and expert review. The translation process involved forward translation into Turkish by the research team, followed by expert review by four Turkish language and literature teachers. Items were considered linguistically appropriate if at least three out of four reviewers rated them as suitable; otherwise, items were revised until consensus was reached.

Back-translation into English was then performed, and the final version was approved by the original author. Linguistic equivalence was further tested in a pilot sample of twenty seven bilingual students, with statistical analysis confirming equivalence. A paired samples t-test revealed no significant difference between the Turkish and English forms (*P*>.05), and the two forms were highly correlated (r=.85, *P*<.001), indicating strong linguistic equivalence.

Table 2. Item Reliability Statistics of Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire

	If item dropped	
	Cronbach's α	McDonald's ω
3. I post my emotional pain on social media to get support from others.	0.978	0.978
4. Social media is an outlet to share my bad experiences for gaining sympathy.	0.974	0.974
5. I seek compassion by posting my negative emotions on social media.	0.973	0.973
6. I share the concerns of my life on social media to gain positive attention.	0.972	0.972
8. Posting my painful experiences on social media helps relieve tension by attracting sympathetic reactions.	0.977	0.978

Table 3. CFA Fit Measures

				RMSEA 90% CI	
CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA	Lower	Upper
0.998	0.995	0.00565	0.0609	0.00	0.158

Construct Validity

In assessing the construct validity of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO)

Test was used to assess sample adequacy. The KMO coefficient for the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire was 0.921, indicating excellent sampling adequacy.

Bartlett's test of sphericity was conducted to examine whether the correlation matrix significantly differed from an identity matrix. Bartlett's test was significant (*P*<.001).

The psychometric properties of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire were examined through internal consistency analyses (Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω) for reliability, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for factorial/construct validity, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) for convergent validity, and Pearson correlation analyses with related measures for criterion/convergent validity.

Table 4. Correlations

Correlations											
		Sadfishing total	Social media addiction	SDQ-Total	Externalizing	Internalizing	Emotional	Peer problems	Hyperactivity	Conduct problems	Prososyal
Sadfishing total	r	1	.272**	.034	-.061	.100	.108	.040	-.037	-.012	-.023
Social media addiction	r	.272 **	1	.355**	.296**	.318**	.360**	.094	.327**	.123	-.014
Pearson Correlation **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).											

Reliability Analyses

Reliability analyses indicated very high internal consistency (Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω > .97). As presented in Table 2, all items yielded very high reliability coefficients, reinforcing the internal consistency of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire.

Social Media Addiction Scale: Cronbach's α=0.85;

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (total difficulties): Cronbach's α=0.69.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) supported a unidimensional structure with excellent model fit indices: $\chi^2(5)=6.97$, p=.223; CFI=.998; TLI=.995; RMSEA=.061 (90% CI [.00, .158]); SRMR=.006. All standardized factor loadings were high and statistically significant (λ=.93–.97, *P*<.001), indicating that the items strongly represented the latent construct. These findings support the unidimensional structure of the scale.

Table 3 confirms excellent model fit indices, supporting the unidimensional structure of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire.

Composite Reliability (CR)

$$CR = \frac{(\sum \lambda)^2}{(\sum \lambda)^2 + \sum(1 - \lambda^2)}$$

Formula:

λ=standardized factor loading, $(1 - \lambda^2)$=error variance

CR ≥ .70 → sufficient, CR ≥ .80 → good, CR ≥ .90 → very strong

CR ≈ .98

The composite reliability coefficient of the Sadfishing Scale was very high (CR ≈ .98), indicating excellent internal consistency and strong reliability of the construct.

Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

$$AVE = \frac{\sum \lambda^2}{n}$$

Formula:

AVE ≥ .50 → convergent validity exists
AVE; mean λ^2: ≈ (.87 + .92 + .94 + .94 + .87) / 5
≈ .91
The average variance extracted value was high (AVE ≈ .91), exceeding the recommended threshold of .50 and demonstrating strong convergent validity of the scale.

Criterion validity

Correlation Analysis

Sadfishing scores were positively correlated with social media addiction (r=0.272**, *P*=.005), while social media addiction was moderately associated with total difficulties (r=0.355**, *P*<.001), externalizing difficulties (r=0.296**, *P*=.002), internalizing difficulties (r=0.318**, *P*=.001), emotional problems (r=0.360**, *P*<.001), and hyperactivity (r=0.327**, *P*=.001) (Table 4).

Table 4 highlights a significant positive correlation between sadfishing and social media addiction, while social media addiction itself was moderately associated with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

DISCUSSION

This study provides robust evidence for the reliability and validity of the Turkish version of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire among high school students. The results confirm its unidimensional structure and strong psychometric properties, supporting its applicability in adolescent research. Although sadfishing levels were generally low, its significant association with social media addiction and psychosocial difficulties suggests that it may serve as an indicator of emotional vulnerability and maladaptive online coping strategies.

Factor analyses indicated that all items loaded strongly on a single factor and showed acceptable item–total correlations, suggesting that the items consistently represent the underlying construct. High internal consistency and temporal stability were observed, as reflected in Cronbach's alpha coefficients and test–retest correlations.

KMO and Bartlett test results supported the suitability of the data for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). CFA demonstrated good model fit, with fit indices reaching or exceeding commonly recommended thresholds. Standardized factor loadings were high, indicating that each item significantly reflected the sadfishing construct, supporting the factor validity of the scale. However, it should be noted that some fit indices (e.g., RMSEA) were less optimal, which may reflect semantic overlap between items rather than an inherent weakness in the structure. Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω coefficients exceeding recommended standards, and composite reliability and AVE values also indicate excellent psychometric performance, while the extremely high reliability coefficients may also indicate some item redundancy that could be considered in future scale improvement studies.

Although the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire demonstrated exceptionally high reliability, with Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω coefficients exceeding .97, such values may indicate potential semantic overlap among items. This raises the possibility that certain items are phrased too similarly, thereby inflating internal consistency without necessarily enhancing construct coverage. Future research should examine whether this redundancy stems from overly parallel wording and consider refining the instrument accordingly. In particular, the development of a shorter version of the scale could be explored as a practical alternative, reducing respondent burden while maintaining psychometric robustness. Such efforts would not only improve measurement efficiency but also enhance the applicability of the scale in larger and more diverse adolescent populations.

Correlations with relevant constructs provided additional support for the validity of the measurement. Sadfishing scores showed a small but significant positive correlation with social media addiction. Consistent with previous research[7,11], problematic social media use showed moderate positive correlations with intrinsic, extrinsic, and total psychopathology levels, including emotional distress and hyperactivity. However, when interpreted cautiously, as the cross-sectional design did not allow for conclusions about directionality, these relationships suggest that sadfishing behavior may occur in a pattern that may coexist with broader emotional distress and problematic social media use. It is equally possible that adolescents experiencing emotional distress turn to social media for expression and support, or that specific patterns of social media use intensify emotional difficulties over time. The strongest observed association with emotional distress (r=.36) suggests that emotional vulnerability may play a significant role in sadfishing behaviors, although this relationship is likely shaped by multiple individual and contextual factors.

The absence of gender differences in sadfishing, coupled with higher social media addiction scores among female students, aligns with prior research but warrants further exploration across cultural contexts. Therefore, these results should not be interpreted as reflecting universal gender-based tendencies.

Compared to previous studies, the primary contribution of the present research lies in its focus on Turkish high school students and its examination of a broader set of psychosocial correlates. While earlier studies have emphasized attachment anxiety, emotional needs, or digital literacy as correlates of sadfishing[7,12,13], the current study integrates these perspectives with indicators of social media addiction, peer problems, prosocial skills, hyperactivity, and attention difficulties. This broader approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the psychosocial profiles associated with sadfishing in adolescence.

Our findings suggest that sadfishing among adolescents may reflect a combination of emotional vulnerability, social needs, and patterns of online engagement. For some adolescents, social media may function as an accessible space for emotional expression, particularly when offline support is perceived as limited. Although such online expression may provide short-term emotional relief or social connection, it may also expose adolescents to potential risks such as negative feedback or online conflict. Importantly, these patterns should not be interpreted as inherently maladaptive; rather, sadfishing behaviors may represent one of several coping or communication strategies available to young people in digital environments.

Consistent with previous findings[14,15], problematic internet and social media use appears to be associated with emotional difficulties and coping styles. Our results align with this literature in showing that sadfishing scores are related to social media addiction and internalizing difficulties. Compared with studies conducted among university students[11], the present findings suggest that similar motivations (e.g., seeking validation or emotional support) may also be present among younger adolescents, although the specific contextual triggers and developmental dynamics may differ.

Strengths

This study represents the first adaptation of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire into Turkish for use with adolescents, thereby filling a notable gap in the literature. The instrument demonstrated strong psychometric performance, including high reliability and validity, supporting its applicability in future research. By focusing on high school students, the study addresses a critical developmental stage in which social media behaviors are particularly influential, offering valuable insights for both clinical and educational contexts.

Limitations

Despite these strengths, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study sample was drawn from a single private high school in Erzurum, Türkiye, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader adolescent populations. The relatively small sample size (N=106) further limits the statistical power and external validity of the results. Additionally, the cross-sectional design precludes conclusions regarding causality between sadfishing, social media addiction, and psychosocial difficulties. Self-report measures, while practical, may also be subject to social desirability bias and underreporting of sensitive behaviors. Future research should aim to replicate these findings in larger and more diverse samples, including public schools and different regions, and employ longitudinal designs to better capture the temporal dynamics of sadfishing behaviors.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study hold important implications for adolescent mental health and digital literacy. Although sadfishing behaviors were generally infrequent, their association with social media addiction and psychosocial difficulties suggests that adolescents may be using online platforms as coping mechanisms for emotional vulnerability.[16,17] These results highlight the need for preventive strategies that strengthen emotional regulation skills, promote supportive peer and family relationships, and foster critical digital literacy. Integrating such approaches into school-based mental health programs could help adolescents navigate online interactions more safely and reduce the risk of maladaptive coping patterns.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the present study highlights sadfishing, which can be reliably and validly measured among high school students using the Turkish version of the Social Media Sadfishing Questionnaire, is defined as a multifaceted online behavior situated at the intersection of emotional expression, and digital engagement. These findings point to the potential value of interventions that promote emotional regulation, supportive peer and family relationships, and digital literacy, rather than framing sadfishing solely as a problematic or attention-seeking behavior.

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