PREDICTORS OF ONLINE "SAD-FISHING" AMONG

COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

Individuals, specifically teenagers and adolescents, have been turning to social media platforms for creating, maintaining, and even terminating social relationships. In fact, the Pew Research Center found in their 2015 report that 57% of American teens have met a new friend online, mainly through Facebook or Instagram; a behavior more common amongst the older teens (ages 15-17). In fact, even when meeting new people in real life, 62% of teens reported their social media usernames as the first piece of information they share with their new counterpart (Lenhart et al., 2015). Additionally, in Lenhart and others' (2015) report, the authors acknowledge that interactions online can range from support to unnecessary and unwarranted drama. Specifically, 68% of teens reported receiving social support from their online social system through a challenging time they were facing; and equally, 68% reported that others posted content to create drama between peer groups (Lenhart et al., 2015).

Social relationships can be thought of in two dimensions: social integration and social support (Creswell et al., 2015). Specifically, social integration refers to the social context in which an individual resides, the level of embeddedness they have within this context, as well as the diversity of that context and connection; further, social support refers to the quality of social assistance one perceives to have in their environment (Creswell et al., 2015). Knowing that there is a strong preference and a strong prevalence of creating and maintaining relationships online, it is of interest to investigate how personality plays a role in terms of the content that is posted on social media sites. Specifically, the concept of attachment and social desirability have made their way into the literature surrounding social media and social behaviors.

Defining "Sad-Fishing"

When defining what "sad-fishing" is, it is important to understand this new phenomenon from both the perspective of the person posting the content, and the consumer of such content. This complex interplay between poster and consumer will become clear with the following sections, however it is important to note that research is currently lacking in its exploration of the two perspectives. Firstly, there is the perspective of the author of the content, in so that they are utilizing social media for its social support benefits. Secondly, from the perspective of the consumer of the content, they may resort to a phenomenon of victim blaming or capitalize on the opportunity to gain social capital. Therefore, "sad-fishing" is best described as the behavioral tendency for social media users to publish exaggerated claims about their emotional state to generate sympathy from their viewers (Coughlan, 2019).

Social Media and Social Support

The social media research literature supports the beneficial use of social media as a means of gaining social support. As noted previously, Nick and colleagues (2018) found that as the use of social media networking sites increased (i.e., from 12% to 90% of 18-29 year-olds between 2005-2015), so too did the use these platforms for emotional support. The researchers aimed to transfer the knowledge of social support systems from in person to online through validating the Online Social Support Scale. Their results showed that individuals engaged in online social media behaviors to obtain four types of support: esteem or emotional support (receiving communication from others indicates being held in high regard), social companionship (support from online friends conveys a sense of belonging), informational support (individuals offering advice, support or a new

perspective) and finally, instrumental support (referral of material resources; Nick et al., 2018).

When faced with interpersonal dilemmas, there are often a plethora of coping strategies upon which an individual can call. According to Eschenbeck and colleagues (2018), the most common strategies are 1) problem or emotion focused, 2) approach or avoidance based, 3) engaging or disengaging with the situation, or 4) seeking social support. While Eschenbeck and colleagues' study investigated the development of coping skills in children, it is interesting to note that the popularity of referring to social media or media use in general started at a younger age (around 9-10 years old) than what the researchers anticipated. Specifically, Eschenbeck and colleagues (2018) found that as age increased, the strategy of seeking social support in person in the community decreased, while avoidant types of coping were more readily used. Additionally, children who engaged more with media and social media, were more likely to have physical and emotional stress symptoms (Eschenbeck et al., 2018).

The most recent research conducted on the phenomena of social media and social engagement comes from Ng (2020). In this study, the researcher investigated the use of social networking sites as a means of cooperating with others. Social cooperation in this sense refers to in-group cooperation and helping behavior through the means of reciprocal altruism and cultivating allies (Ng, 2020). Using social capital theory as a base, Ng (2020) argues that the individual's social network generates emotional support through gaining and showing trust: the more an individual connects with those who are not related to the individual (e.g. a friend or colleague reaching out for help), the more advantage the individual gains. As mentioned previously, increased self-disclosure leads

to a sense of deeper connections, it is consistent that such information sharing leads to reciprocity with the in-group (Ng, 2020).

This work is enlightening for the current research as it shows the other side of sad-fishing; that is, the point of view of the consumer of the sad-fishing post. If the consumer is reading such content, they may intrinsically feel that they will benefit from engaging in and responding to the content, there is a duty of care to best equip the recipient to potentially offer the alleged "sad-fishing" individual tools and resources to help their coping.

Social Media and Victim Blaming

Due to the relatively recent nature of the concept of "sad-fishing," the social media research literature lacks a consistent definition of this phenomenon. However, as previously stated, the term generally refers to the behavioral trend in which social media users make exaggerated claims about their troubles and emotional states to generate sympathy (Coughlan, 2019). From the perspective of the consumer of the sad-fishing content, the act of posting potentially false information about mental health in and of itself can most relevantly conclude in victim blaming on social media. As previously stated, with the growth of social networking sites, individuals are utilizing social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to obtain a sense of social support during challenging times (Lenhart, et al., 2015). Therefore, content shared tends to be more personal and descriptive in terms of the individual's intrapersonal distress; most frequently sharing feelings of depression and anxiety. How an individual assesses and responds to such information shared through social media relies on two concepts: issue engagement and attribution of responsibility (Li, Kim & O'Boyle, 2017). Issue

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engagement is dependent upon the perceived importance of the situation, risks associated with the event(s), and the level of personal connection the individual viewing the content has towards the matter (Li et al., 2017). Additionally, attribution of responsibility simply refers to whom the individual viewing the content assigns blame. Li and colleagues (2017) state that situations shared on social media specific to an individual alone (e.g. mental health) when compared to a group social condition (e.g. racism) warrant more victim blaming: blaming the individual for putting themselves in to the situation they are sharing about. This is potentially due to the human tendency to assert the issue as a deficiency of the individual (e.g. no coping skills, being overly dramatic etc.) as opposed to a maladaptive social condition (Li et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Warranting Theory explains how individuals form their impressions of others, specifically through online platforms (Scott et al., 2020). These impressions are formed on two different variables: social identity claims (who they claim to be online and how the individual promotes their self-image) and behavioral residue (sharing of comments made about the individual, either to themselves specifically or through others). This theory argues that individuals are inherently suspicious of the motivations behind posting content seeking support online and any negative feedback they may receive is "deserved" (Scott et al., 2020). This lack of support continues offline, where individuals who seek support for cyberbullying are met with more accusations about their individual responsibility for the backlash they've received. Scott and colleagues (2020) indicated in their study that victim blaming increases as the perceived victim discloses more information about their mental health. Specific to sad-fishing then, when individuals post content online seeking support for their feelings of depression or anxiety, individuals

responding tend to accuse the creator of the content as lying or exaggerating their feelings and the situation to gain attention they are lacking in their current social circle offline.

For the individual, if they are truly suffering from depression or anxiety and are receiving such criticism from their peers, their existing feelings can become exacerbated. On the other hand, if the individual *is* experiencing difficulties in other aspects of their life such as peer relationships or social support from their parents, and are receiving such criticisms online, they may conclude there is no such help, whether online or in real life, for them. In fact, as individuals become more comfortable online in terms of sharing personal information (e.g. mental health status), the potential for gaslighting (consumers emotionally bullying individuals for sharing their thoughts, guilt-tripping the poster for sharing) also increases (Li et al., 2017). With the increased preference to disclose personal information and seek social support online, along with the rise of victim blaming and tendency to accuse individuals of sad-fishing, it is important to understand why individuals turn to posting such support seeking content initially. Factors such as personality traits and psychosocial phenomenon (such as attachment formation styles) become important in understanding the person as a whole.

Social Media and Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory

To reiterate, the literature is currently sparse with regard to the exploration of *why* individuals may feel compelled to seek attention, validation, or support online in an intensified manner, as occurs in sad-fishing. As previously stated, it is often the consumers of the "sad-fishing" content that believe the information shared is exaggerated, despite the posters well intentions to authentically share their emotions online (Coughlan, 2019; Li et al., 2017). However, this dynamic is still to be explored

thoroughly. In addition to the theory of victim blaming and Warranting Theory, Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory is of particular interest when understanding the new phenomenon of sad-fishing. This theory posits that individuals who participate in morally questionable acts (such as lying about or exaggerating mental health struggles online), will often use a multitude of techniques to reframe the behavior as socially appropriate (Dang et al., 2017). Detert and colleagues (2008) further explain that during moral disengagement, the moral self-regulatory process is inhibited, working as a selective activation pathway which allow the individual feel free from their self-sanctions and guilt. There are currently eight mechanisms in which an individual can act upon to reframe or remove oneself from guilt: displacing responsibility, diffusing responsibility, attributing blame to outside of the self, distorting consequences, dehumanizing potential victims (seeing them as undeserving of basic human consideration), moral justification, euphemistic labeling to diminish severity, and advantageous comparison (to make this act seem better than other more harmful immoral behaviors) (Dang et al., 2017; Detert et al., 2008; Somma et al., 2020).

Naquin and colleagues (2010) were among the first to investigate these mechanisms in relation to social media or online behavior specifically. They were interested in understanding the justification of lying online (via email) as opposed to lying in written communication (via handwritten letter). To summarize, these researchers found that individuals were more likely to lie through email (versus a handwritten letter) and to exude more effort in justifying their behavior in an effort to release guilt and distance themselves from any consequences (Naquin et al., 2010). Here, it is clear where Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory comes in to play: the cognitive reframing

present in this work is similar to that found in Dang and colleagues' (2017) work with leaders who lie about their subordinates' immoral behaviors. Language that is used to justify these behaviors reflected one of the eight mechanisms used for moral disengagement (Dang et al., 2017). What now becomes of interest is the notion of some individuals being more susceptible to moral disengagement.

Detert and colleagues (2008) found that individuals with higher levels of empathy are less likely to engage in moral disengagement; rather, opting for engaging in personalization of issues, sharing concerns for others, and considering how their peers or significant others may perceive their behavior if they were to participate in moral disengagement. On the other hand, those with self-reported antisocial tendencies and trait cynicism are more likely to exhibit moral disengagement as there is an inherent distrust of others, questioning their motives and a higher likelihood of diffusing responsibility (Detert et al., 2008; Somma et al., 2020). In fact, Somma and colleagues (2020) found that individuals with a higher rating on the traits of Machiavellianism and narcissism had a decreased level of moral development, while also engaging in behaviors such as deceitfulness, impulsivity and manipulativeness. These ideas will be further developed in the following sections.

Social Media and Personality

Narcissism and Social Media Use

Hawk and colleagues (2019) found that the formation of online relationships occurs in much the same as in real life situations: the focus is on the individual's identity expression. In fact, Marshall and colleagues (2020) showed that participants in their study that rated highly on narcissistic scales used Twitter to both connect and enhance their

friendships, while simultaneously posting content for purposes of admiration. However, the need to seek validation online may become more maladaptive, as in cases when individuals post attention-seeking content to increase their social appeal. Further, when narcissism is considered on a continuum as opposed to a clinical diagnosis, it becomes clear that this drive to seek validation and increase social appeal has a strong relationship to personality traits. Continuing with the work of Hawk and others (2019), narcissistic individuals tend to manipulate their social environment to create opportunities for self-enhancement. This position was further corroborated by Ng (2020), who found that individuals who approach social media as a means of social appeal spent more time constructing and altering an ideal form of themselves and receive self-affirmation through feedback. The Dynamic Self-Regulatory Processing Model argues that individuals exhibit excessive interpersonal efforts in order to showcase their ideal self (Hawk et al., 2019). In fact, adolescents who reported higher attention seeking motivations for posting content on Facebook also had higher levels of narcissistic tendencies (Hawk et al., 2019) These efforts become more pronounced during times of stress and may be linked to attachment bonds of individuals (Hart, Nailling, Bizer, & Collins, 2015).

However, researchers should be cautious in describing the "narcissistic" individual. While it is simple to dismiss these individuals as manipulative and attention-seeking, it is important to remember that narcissistic tendencies should be viewed as just that - *tendencies.* Individuals who score more highly on narcissistic tendency scales, may also score higher on measures of anxious attachment style. These relationships are more complicated than they may initial appear on the surface.

Attachment Styles and Social Media Use

When investigating the relationship between attachment bonds and Facebook use, Hart and others (2015) found that individuals with insecure attachment type typically had an augmented intimacy-seeking behavior approach to online social relationships. These individuals managed their chronic concerns about being rejected by others through compulsive attempts to find relationships (Hart et al., 2015). These results are consistent with work by Hawk and colleagues (2019), which found that adolescents who were experiencing behavioral or interpersonal difficulties also reported posting content that was consistent with the need for affirmation from others. The concern here lies in the fact that Facebook and social media interactions in terms of validation and affirmation are typically short in their time frame and benefit, are thought of as lacking a deep social connection and fade easily (Hart et al., 2015). Finally, Ng (2020) posits that those who prefer this form of social engagement were more highly emotionally attached to social media as a form of connection and interaction.

Furthermore, Fineberg and colleagues (2018) reviewed the literature on adaptive and maladaptive compulsive internet use, as well as access to treatment for individuals who experience compulsive internet use. First and foremost, the authors acknowledge the relationship between problematic use of the internet and obsessive-compulsive disorders and impulse control disorders (Fineberg et al., 2018). The need for repetitive checking and compulsive posting, which these researchers noted, are consistent with the attachment theories surrounding social media use (Hart et al., 2015; Hawk et al., 2019). As Hart and colleagues (2015) noted, individuals with insecure attachments tended to have more compulsive mechanisms for forming relationships. Specific to the online

forum, these compulsive behaviors tended to manifest as sending friend requests online in high volumes; while repetitive checking refers to constantly checking whether friends have "commented", "liked" or "shared" their posts online, usually at the expense of their offline responsibilities (Hart et al., 2015). In fact, positive online feedback from peers reinforced notions of support and validation, potentially leading to a higher emotional attachment to social media engagement (Ng, 2020).

Deceit or Attention Seeking Tendencies and Social Media Use

There is very little research on the act of lying on social media platforms. When considering the phenomena of sad-fishing there is also a need to understand if there is an aspect of deceitfulness or even Machiavellian tendencies influencing the desire to post such content. This is not to say that those who are posting sad-fishing content are "evil", "bad" or "wrong". Quite the opposite: with an understanding of what is motivating these individuals to post tailored content online as a cry for help and understanding these qualities, interventions can be better tailored and referred to these individuals.

Machiavellian individuals may be cynical, manipulative, morally pragmatic, and strategic in their social engagement in order to gain a certain reputation (Marshall et al., 2020). Marshall and colleagues (2020) hypothesized that when studying the difference between Twitter and Facebook users, those who held Machiavellian tendencies would engage in social media behavior with a goal of gaining social reward and attention from peers. However, these researchers found the opposite with regard to Twitter usage and found that individuals who scored highly on Machiavellian tendencies avoided looking boastful online (Marshall et al., 2020). That study, however, was aimed specifically at investigating "positive" behaviors online (e.g. self-promotion, sharing positive life events

etc.). Would the same result hold if the content being investigated was more in line of sad-fishing? It could be argued, that if Machiavellian individuals do post content in order to gain a reputation or social status, perhaps posting information in the form of sad-fishing would be a more appropriate manipulation strategy.

When speaking of deceitfulness and online communication, Naquin, Kurtzberg and Belkin (2010) were arguably the first to explore how lying behaviors manifest differently on different media platforms. Drawing on Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory, online communication has the advantage of heightened psychosocial distance when one is sharing false information, as opposed to engaging in the behavior face-to-face (Naquin et al., 2010). Here, the authors argue that face-to-face communication often comes with impression management and social consequences if the individual is suspected of lying (Naquin et al., 2010). Furthermore, engaging in online communication allows for the individual to edit their information for as long as necessary, removes the guilt of lying, and is less permanent (Naquin et al., 2010). Lastly, the authors argue that individuals who lie online tend to justify their lying more thoroughly due to the ambiguity of "online etiquette" (Naquin et al., 2010).

Rationale for Current Study

Although a number of studies have examined psychosocial correlates of social media behavior, in general the literature remains sparse with regard to information about the potential psychosocial correlates of the specific social media behavior of sad-fishing. There has been a link made between social media behaviors and personality traits such as attention seeking and validation seeking. Beyond these measures, there is also a need to further understand the context and reasons behind *why* individuals sad-fish. To date,

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researchers have focused on quantitative surveys that measure behaviors surrounding social media use and have drawn conclusions from those results. However, what those measures lack is the ability to detail the reasons why individuals with these tendencies feel the need to post such content. By including a qualitative component, this thesis project will provide the opportunity for early "illness-detection" through social markers relevant to the individual. This will facilitate deeper understanding of the predictors of different motivations for social media behaviors; for example, understanding the psychosocial differences between someone reaching out for support for their depression versus someone who is manipulating their audience due to Machiavellian tendencies that prompt a strong desire for more directed attention. A better understanding of these motivations will provide a clearer direction for tailored intervention and support.

Hypothesis

Based on the current literature, it is hypothesized that the theoretically relevant variables of narcissistic tendencies, Machiavellianism, anxious attachment style, and a lower perceived interpersonal social support, or a combination thereof will differ between sad-fishing status.

II. METHOD

Design

This research had a mixed design research design with the use of qualitative questions to gather contextual information about the nature of the individual's sad-fishing tendencies, alongside quantitative questionnaires and surveys to gather more explicit information on psychosocial behaviors such as lying, deceit, neurotic tendencies and other attention-seeking behaviors. Approval of methods and procedures was obtained from the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB; IRB #7404).

Participants

Due to the focus on emerging adults and sad-fishing behaviors, participants include college students, aged 18-25 years old. Participants were recruited from the Texas State University San Marcos campus through online measures such as in-class announcements and the PSY 1300 Psychology Research Experience (SONA). Participants received class credit or extra credit for their participation. Inclusion criteria included use of social media, in so that if participants responded that they do not use social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), their answers were separated from those who do in order to ensure analyses were not skewed. Additionally, participants had the chance to detail what types of social media platforms they use so analyses explored where this behavior may be most exhibited.

Procedure

Participants were given a synopsis of the research project through in-class announcements and the PSY 1300 Psychology Research Experience (SONA). They were informed of the purpose of the project and given a brief introduction as to what to expect

from the online survey. After providing informed consent, participants completed an online survey on Qualtrics, which required approximately 45 minutes. This survey included questions about demographics, social media use and various psychological traits. At the end of the session, participants were debriefed and will automatically receive their course credit via the SONA system.

Measures

The following measures encompass a wide arrange of behaviors and tendencies that are typical of individuals who post sad-fishing content on social media in order to portray themselves in a way that receives social validation. Based on the literature, and based on the specific cut off scores of the following surveys, "sad-fishers" were those who report whether they have engaged in sad-fishing behaviors or not. Each of the cut off scores are detailed in the scales respective sections.

Adult Attachment Style

In the Adult Attachment Scale – Close Relationships Version, (Collins, 1996), participants were asked to respond to a number of items relating to their concerns in their important close relationships. This version was created in an effort to remove the focus from romantic relationships (as was the case in the original) to allow participants to consider all their important relationships such as those with family members and close friends. Items include statements such as "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others", "I find that people are never there when you need them" and "I often wonder whether other people really care about me" (Collins, 1996). Responses range on a 5-point scale, with 1 being "not at all characteristic of me" and 5 being "very characteristic of me". Items are designed to measure "close", "dependent" and "anxious" attachment

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styles, indicating comfortableness around closeness, dependability on others and worry over being abandoned by others, respectively.

Interpersonal Support

In order to measure whether an individual perceives they have adequate social support in their environment, the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL; Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck, & Hoberman, 1985) will be used. This survey includes a list of questions designed to measure perceptions of social support for the participants. The ISEL (originally a list of 40 statements) has a shortened version list of 12 statements surrounding social resources, balanced between positive and negative statements about their social relationships (Merz et al., 2014). The items on this list will fall into one of four subscales: tangible support, appraisal support, self-esteem support and belonging support. Questions include "I feel that there is no one I can share my most private worries with", "There is someone I can turn to for advice about handling problems with my family" and "When I need suggestions on how to deal with a personal problem, I know someone I can turn to". Participants respond by indicating a number 0-3 about how true that statement is for them; 0 being definitely false, 1 being probably false, 2 being probably true and 3 being definitely true. The negative statements are reversed coded (a score of 0 on this item would receive a score of 3, for example), with higher scores indicating a higher level of perceived social support.

Online Social Support Scale

The Online Social Support Scale, as developed by Nick and colleagues (2018), measures the level of perceived social support that an individual experience online. In addition to asking users which social media application they use most frequently, users

were also asked a series of questions to measure different aspects of social support

online. Validating this scale against well known in-person social support measures, Nick

and others (2018) required participants to indicate the frequency in which events have

occurred to the individual while interacting with others online (0 = never, 4 = a lot).

Examples include, "Online, people say or do things that make me feel good about

myself", "People pay attention to me online", and "If I had a problem, people would help

me online by saying what they would do". Higher scores indicate a higher perceived

online social support system.

It is important to have both forms of social support measured in this study. If there

is a trend in participants' response in so that they feel they lack in-person social support,

but report having higher social support systems in place online, this can greatly indicate

where resources should be spent in terms of coping offline.

Short Dark Triad

The Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) is a 27-item inventory that

measures the three Dark Triads of personality: Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and

Psychopathy. Of interest in this study, however, is the trait of Machiavellianism.

Therefore, the first seven items of the Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) will be

used, with participants indicating how much they agree with each statement; example

items including "Manipulating the situation takes planning", "Keep a low profile if you

want to get your way" and "Flattery is a good way to get people on your side". The mean

score of these seven items were taken to indicate how highly one associates with the trait

of Machiavellianism.

Narcissistic Tendencies

Finally, to measure narcissistic tendencies, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16; Ames, Rose & Anderson, 2006) was used. Participants are required to indicate next to each statement that resonates with them the most; a few examples include choosing between "I really like to be the center of attention" or "It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention", "People sometimes believe what I tell them" or "I can make anybody believe anything I want them to". Certain responses are indicative of higher narcissistic tendencies, and if these are chosen more frequently individuals are thought to have more narcissistic characteristics.

"Sad-Fishing" Specific Context

Qualitative questions were designed by the researcher and the committee members in order to best capture contextual clues as to why an individual would post sad-fishing content and their propensity to sad-fish. These questions were constructed in a manner that best reflect the themes outlined by Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory; for example, themes may include justifying morally wrong behaviors and shifting blame to others. Question Four was coded specifically to analyze the frequency in which participants answers fit into one of Bandura's Moral Disengagement strategies. Based off the answers given by participants, coding took on a dichotomous approach in order to assign participants in to one of two groups: sad-fishers and non-sad-fishers. The questions are listed below:

Question One. Whether you are familiar with the term or not, how would you define sad-fishing?

Question Two. Under what circumstances would you feel compelled to exaggerate your personal mental health status online? (For example, the exaggeration could be something like saying that you are extremely depressed when you are not.)

Question Three. Is there a situation where you would prefer to share your personal struggles online as opposed to in person? If so, why?

Question Four. Under what circumstances would you justify exaggerating or lying about mental health online?

III. DATA ANALYSES

Quantitative Analyses

Quantitative data were screened for possible outliers and missing values before analysis. The groups of sad-fishers ($n = 105$) and non-sad-fishers ($n = 206$) were established by identifying whether or not they responded in support of lying about their mental health online, no matter the circumstance. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare the two sad-fishing groups on continuous self-report variables: adult attachment style, interpersonal and online social support, narcissistic tendencies, and Machiavellianism. Chi-square analyses were used to compare the two sad-fishing groups on categorial self-report variables (gender, ethnicity, race, biological sex and age).

Qualitative Analyses

In terms of the qualitative analysis, all participant responses were coded according to the researcher's checklist of attention seeking behaviors that are most evident in the literature. Specifically, a directed content analysis approach was used. This is most appropriate as, according to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), there is some existing literature on potential theories that could benefit from expansion to the field of sad-fishing. Based on the literature, themes that will be identified include a lack of social support in their environment, a need for validation through posting content, and social approval or affirmation based on the response given by viewers of the individual's content. A rank order comparison of the frequency of these codes was used to provide contextual evidence for why individuals feel the need to post such content; an aspect that is currently missing in the literature.

IV. RESULTS

Quantitative Results

Participant Characteristics

After removing outliers in the data set, the total number of participants equaled 314. As indicated at the top of Table 1, 206 participants (66.3%) were classified as non-sad-fishers, with the remaining 105 (33.7%) classified as sad-fishers. Two hundred and sixty-one participants

identified as female (83.6%), 49 as male (15.8%) and 2 as non-binary. On average, participants were 20 years old (SD = 2.5 years, range = 17 – 40). In this sample of Texas State students, 64.97% self-identified as White, 15.3% as Black or African American, 4.7% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 1.6% as Asian. Additionally, 46.8% identified as Hispanic/Latino(a). Table 1 shows age, gender identity, biological sex, race or whether participants identified as Hispanic/Latinx according to sad-fishing status. These variables did not differ significantly based on group membership (sad-fisher vs. non-sad-fisher).

T-tests and Chi-Square Analyses

Comparisons for the validated scales are presented in Table 2. As is shown, the psychological variables of interest, collectively, did not significantly differ between sad-fishing status. It is important to note that Anxious Attachment Style was marginally significantly different between the two groups of participants, $t(307) = 1.839$, $p = .067$. It is also of note to highlight that sad-fishers and non-sad-fishers also did not significantly differ on how many hours they spent on different social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram), nor on what kinds of activities they did on those

platforms (such as post pictures, share videos or post written content). Sad-fishers and non-sad-fishers did not differ significantly in how they rated their online social support or their interpersonal social support. This indicates that whether or not one has more tendencies to sad-fish, it may not have to do with the appeal of online social support over interpersonal social support.

Correlations

Table 3 shows the correlations between all the variables of interest in this research study. In relation to the hypotheses, anxious attachment style was negatively and significantly associated with all subscales of the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL)-12: appraisal ($r(307) = -.295, p < .001$), belonging ($r(306) = -.23, p < .001$) and tangible ($r(306) = -.216, p < .001$). Anxious attachment style was positively and significantly associated with Machiavellianism, $r(307) = .279, p < .001$. Machiavellianism and Narcissistic tendencies were positively and significantly related, $r(312) = .112, p = .047$. Narcissistic tendencies were positively and significantly related to the ISEL-12 subscale of Belonging, $r(311) = .158, p = .005$. No other significant correlations were found among the predictor variables in this study ($|rs| < .104, ps > .067$).

Table 1. Demographics of Sad-Fishers and Non-Sad-Fishers

Demographics	Sad-Fishers (105; 33.7%)	Non-Sad-Fishers (206; 66.3%)
Mean Age	20.33 (SD=2.42)	20.29 (SD=2.54)
% Male	20% (21)	14% (29)
% Hispanic	44.7% (47)	48.5% (100)
Race		
% White	65.7% (69)	65.5% (135)
% Black or African American	16.19% (17)	15.04% (31)
% American Indian or Alaskan Native	4.7% (5)	4.8% (10)
% Native Hawaiian	.9% (1)	0%
% Asian	.9% (1)	1.9% (4)

Note. As specified in the demographics column, the variables indicated by a percentage include their whole number (*n*). * indicates *p* significant at the .05 level

Table 2. *T-test* Comparisons of Validated Scales by Sad-Fishing Status

	Sad-Fishers	Non-Sad-Fishers		
	M(SD)	*M*(SD)	*t*(df)	*p*
Close Attachment Style	3.17(.627)	3.19(.736)	-.273(308)	.785
Dependent Attachment Style	2.71(.708)	2.78(.706)	-.844(311)	.399
Anxious Attachment Style	3.42(.918)	3.19(1.072)	1.839(307)	.067
ISEL Appraisal	12.08(2.822)	12.26(3.081)	-.496(312)	.621
ISEL Belonging	11.65(2.818)	11.75(2.893)	-.300(311)	.765
ISEL Tangible	12.38(2.55)	12.41(2.698)	-.090(311)	.928
Online Social Support	73.22((31.45)	73.63(33.971)	-.099(284)	.921
Machiavellianism	3.32(.530)	3.37(.613)	-.661(312)	.509
Narcissism	3.54(2.316)	3.51(2.425)	.105(312)	.916

Note. * indicates *p* significant at the .05 level

Table 3. Correlations Between Hypothesized Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Anxious Attachment Style	1	-.295**	-.231**	-.216**	.279**	-.078
2.ISEL: Appraisal		1	.554**	.607**	-.104	.039
3.ISEL: Belonging			1	.678**	-.035	.158*
4.ISEL: Tangible				1	-.092	.050
5.Machiavellianism					1	.112*
6.Narcissism						1

Note. ** indicates *p* significant at the < .001 level. * indicates *p* significant at the .05 level

Qualitative Results

Directed Content Analysis and Frequency Coding

Four qualitative questions were included at the end of the survey in order to gain insight into the phenomenon of sad-fishing. These responses were examined via directed content analysis, using previous literature to guide categorization of responses to further identify themes. Next, manual frequency coding was used to examine how often individuals responded in line with those themes.

Question One

For this item, participants were asked, "Whether you are familiar with this term or not, how would you define 'sad-fishing' online?" Responses to this question did not have specific predetermined themes, rather it served as an exploratory item to understand the general awareness of the term "sad-fishing" in society. Particular themes did emerge among the question such as victim blaming and attention seeking. Additional attachment style themes did show amongst answers as well. Some representative responses question included:

Attention Seeking. Responses that categorized into these themes centered around participants' perception that those who post "sad-fishing" content have the motive to gain attention. Some examples are included below:

"People exaggerate their emotional problems to gain sympathy."
"When people are looking for attention online; when they dramatize their situation."
"I would define "sad-fishing" as obnoxiously posting online about [being] sad or melancholy to receive attention"
"Faking that you're sad so people are sympathetic."
"When someone tries to get others to feel bad for them, like when they play the victim."
"Looking for attention by faking a mental health disorder or faking an event in your life to allow people to pity you."

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Anxious Attachment. In addition to individuals believing that "sad-fishing" content is posted as a form of attention-seeking, participants also believed that "sad-fishing" is used as a form of seeking relationships as a form of validation. These responses corroborate with findings in the literature that those who seek online interactions in a manipulative manner also tend to have anxious attachment styles (Hart et al., 2015; Hawk et al., 2019). Some responses included:

"Finding someone online to fulfill your sadness."
"Looking for recognition online when you are sad"
"Fishing for pity by posting sad content just gain support. It's a way of manipulating the audience to get likes or even money."
"Posting about how you are feeling negative emotions in hopes someone will talk to you about it"
"I am not familiar with this term, but I think this term means when a person makes posts or comments online, being very severe, dangerous, or alarming, to get attention from others. It is just a way to get other's care and attention"

Victim Blaming. Finally, the theme of victim blaming emerged within this question as individuals identified that those who they believe are exaggerating online are doing so due to a lack of appropriate coping skills. Some responses included:

"People who go online and want validation and sympathy from people just for the attention. They seem to very attention-seeking and are probably going through something but can't deal with it by themselves"
"Sad fishing is like evoking sympathy from your followers for egotistic self-centered purposes"

Question Two

This question asked participants, "Under what circumstances would you feel compelled to exaggerate your personal mental health status online?". As noted previously, for the quantitative analysis section of the thesis, participants' responses to

this question were used to determine whether or not an individual would be classified as a potential sad-fisher or non-sad-fisher.

Sad-Fisher Responses. These responses were typically attention-seeking in nature, with some participants explicitly stating they would sad-fish to seek the attention that they were craving, while others had more subtle tones of attention seeking. It is interesting to note that themes of anxious attachment emerged in these responses, specific to gaining attention from peers when feelings stressed or gaining attention in general when feeling disconnected from others. Machiavellian traits also emerged in so much that these participants were willing to manipulate others in order to gain approval and sympathy from their peers. Some examples of responses that classified an individual as a sad-fisher included:

"When I go through a breakup and say, 'I am going to die now'."
"As a joke"
"When making a joke about losing something."
"I feel the temptation to be more dramatic in general when I see that no one is listening to me and I need them to listen."
"Maybe if I was trying to get a doctor to prescribe medication that I wanted."
"I tend to say things like 'I am homicidal' for comedic effect."
"For attention"
"I usually exaggerate about being stressed to my friend on Snapchat."
"If I wanted some attention from a specific person."
"I find myself exaggerating my personal mental health status online when I'm stressed with school. Sometimes, I find myself saying things that could be taken as a very serious mental health issue, yet I'm only saying it to be dramatic."
"I would exaggerate if I am bored, to start up conversation"
"Probably if I was desperate for attention or validation."
"When I'm trying to get a specific person's attention."
"I tend to sometimes over exaggerate my emotions when I feel overwhelmed, I have a habit of saying things sarcastically."
"If I want attention or people to feel bad for me."

Non-Sad-Fisher Responses. Some examples of responses that would classify an individual as a potential non-sad-fisher included:

"I would not feel comfortable posting that online, ever."
"I would never do something like this. This is inconsiderate and insensitive to the mental health of all others."
"I do not think that people should express their depression or sadness online, because I think people do it for attention."
"I don't think I would ever feel comfortable exaggerating my personal mental health status, or even exposing myself like that online."
"I wouldn't, it's wrong. There are people far worse off than me, so why should I falsify my own mental health to gain empathy that should be given to other people who need it."
"I genuinely would never feel the need to tell or exaggerate my personal mental health status online regardless the situation or what I may be feeling."
"I don't see any situation to lie about that."
"There is no circumstance where I see myself doing something like this."
"I wouldn't feel this way, I am pretty private about mental health problems."
"I do not think you should lie on the internet because the truth will always come out."
"I would never tell people on social media how I feel when I am bummed out because only certain people deserve to know not a whole platform."

Question Three

For this question, participants were asked, "Is there a situation where you would prefer to share your personal struggles online as opposed to in person? If so, why?" Two themes emerged: seeking online validation and seeking interpersonal validation.

Seeking Online Validation. Of all the responses, 153 out of 357 responses fit into this category. Within this theme, a subtheme of Machiavellianism also emerged where participants shared they had time to choose what they could say and how they could portray themselves. Examples of responses that fit into this category included the following:

Ease. Some individuals identified that sharing online presented an easier alternative to sharing face-to-face for a multitude of reasons (e.g., easier to hide emotions, anonymity, faster communication). Examples of this type of response are as follows:

"Yes, because sometimes not telling someone something directly to their face is easier than saying it in person."

"Online it is easier to say what you want to say, and it is also easier. So, if I wanted to talk about something that was bothering me but didn't know how to put it in the right words, I could type it out online and figure out my words as I go. Also, if I wanted to talk about a personal struggle to multiple people instead of just one."

"Yes, because it is easier to be more open online than in person."

"I feel like it is easier to share person experiences/struggles online rather than in person because you get to avoid the awkward facial expressions or save yourself from the possible emotional outburst. People can respond in a way that might not be what we want or expect."

"When coming out as gay to everyone. It was much easier to just post about her then to tell everyone."

"I prefer to share struggles through text than in person because I get more time to reflect on what I am really saying and sometimes I struggle finding words to express myself in person. It's honestly really weird and I wish I was better at communicating in person."

      Social Support. Some responses indicated that the online community presented more accessible support than did communicating in person. A few examples of this response type are as follows:

"Some people do make their lives seem harder than others just so they can get someone to talk to them and recognize their current struggles, and offer guidance and help on fixing their problem".

"Yes, because sometimes I just want to be heard and not always responded to."

"Posting a situation anonymously online that has happened in my life would have probably helped me better understand what I was going through when my parents were getting a divorced. People are more honest and truthful over the internet, and I know that if I had asked for people's help or stories about what they have gone through personally, it would have helped me better understand that I am not the only person going through this alone. It helps you open your eyes and realize that it is not just you that is having a terrible life at the moment, but that you will overcome it and survive the experience."

      Seeking Interpersonal Validation. Of the remaining responses, 9 participants did not respond, leaving 195 participants to fall into the category of seeking in person validation. These responses included some of the following:

      Privacy. Some participants indicated they would prefer to share in person as the security and privacy provided by the online platform is not always guaranteed. Examples of this type of response are below:

"I would rather express my personal feelings in person because when it is online everyone would see it and I'm not all about putting my business online."
"No, I prefer to express myself in person because it's more personal."
"I would rather share personal struggles in person rather than online. I feel a lot of people use social media to gain attention in a sense plus personal business being put on the internet is up for everyone to see."
"Any situation there is regarding my struggles I would prefer to talk in person, it [is] more comfortable to me and do not want private information on the internet."

Authenticity. Participants in this category identified that sharing personal information, specifically emotional distress, face-to-face provided an authentic, human connection between them and those they were entrusting. Some of the responses are as follows:

"I prefer to share my thoughts in person and never online. You can interpret your emotions and words better in person than over text."
"I would not share my struggles online as often as in person as I feel like it could come off as ingenuine or taken out of context."
"I would much rather share in-person, I prefer looking people in the eyes when I speak to them and conversation is too multi-dimensional to get the same feeling out of talking to someone online. Personally."
"Unless it is with a certified professional that could genuinely help, I would always prefer to talk about my personal issues in person. I prefer the security."
"No, I feel that sharing them in person brings about a more emotional connection to and with people."
"Never. In person is so much better and allows you to release those true feelings you are feeling."

Question Four

Finally, the last question asked participants "Under what circumstances would you justify exaggerating or lying about mental health online?". This question was included to measure Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory of how individuals justify morally questionable acts, as previously discussed at the beginning of this paper. The following themes, explicitly from Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory, emerged: euphemistic labelling, attributing blame, advantageous comparison, displacing

responsibility, dehumanizing the victim, diffusing responsibility, and distorting consequences (Dang et al., 2017; Detert et al., 2008; Somma et al., 2020). One additional theme to note is lack of social support, as this is a theme in the current literature that is important when considering online behaviors. Additionally, there were 270 participants who reported that they would not justify lying about their mental health online and therefore did not fit into one of Bandura's themes.

Euphemistic Labelling. Euphemistic labelling in this participant sample took the form of using humor to minimize or placing a positive "spin" on the matter to mask the severity of the lying. Nine participants fell into this category and included responses such as:

"If it was a joke or to raise awareness, I don't really care if someone is exaggerating."
"I feel like everyone can do what they want. No one should indulge themselves 100% on anything that is posted on the internet, because at the end of the day, the person who wrote it is a human who is capable of exaggerating or manipulating. I think people often exaggerate their happiness online to make themselves feel better, and I don't judge them for it."
"When I have something interesting."
"I only do so with the people I am close to and ONLY to tag along with "jokes" and even then, we all know we are exaggerating for the sake of comedy. (e.g., How a test left me extremely depressed/anxious/stressed even though it only slightly stressed)"
"[It] would have to be a joke which is rare because it's not something to joke about."

Attributing Blame. Ten participants fit into this category and often used other people or situations outside of themselves to blame for their lying. Such responses included:

"When I am trying to show someone, who hurt my feelings, how I am doing."
"Probably as a last resort. If you're tired of no one talking to you or hearing you out, then you may exaggerate about your mental health in order to get someone to talk to you about your not so serious problems."
"When [they] pressurize you when you are not ready to talk."
"Maybe if someone was down-playing mental health. To combat their response, I would exaggerate."

"To grab someone's attention who hadn't taken you serious before."

Advantageous Comparison. Five participants responded with answers that fit this category, indicating they justify their lying behavior because lying has a more advantageous outcome than other more harmful behaviors. For these specific participants, their comparisons came from giving individuals the "benefit of the doubt" or using lying as a "last resort", so they felt that there was "no harm" in their lying. Their responses were as follows:

"I don't have much experience with mental illness, so I'm not really sure. I think that some people might do it as a way to get attention, likes, or to kind of reach out before things continue to get worse. Either way, you can never really know how hard things are for someone. They might handle things a different way than you would, but you still can't judge or diminish their experiences."
"I believe people would do it, so they get the attention they do not get offline. They have probably tried other things to get attention online but failed and noticed if they talk about themselves having poor mental health that it will get them the attention that they have been seeking."
"If someone is in danger and they need to go to a hospital to get out of their house."
"If you are depressed and trying to be happy and you exaggerate happy, [it] is justifiable because sometimes you need to fake it to make it."
"If it's not harming anyone"

Displacing Responsibility. This type of justification relates to displacing the responsibility of the outcome (solving the mental health issue/stressor) or the act of lying on to another individual. Five participants responded in a way that supported this theme. Their responses are as follows:

"Saying that you have a mental illness for attention even though you are perfectly fine."
"If you're actually struggling with those feelings and you can't seem to find any help from anywhere else, to maybe find someone who understands online."
"If I felt that a specific person would answer it."
"I would exaggerate my mental health if I [were] not being believed or if someone [were] to not think it was important. I would never lie about my mental health."
"Job."

Dehumanizing the Victim. This type of response belittles the individual who is

seen to be sad-fishing in a way to removes any sense of humaneness from their being. Six

participants responded in this manner. Their answers are below:

*"I think people get caught up in social media and people will do anything to lie for
attention these days."*
*"Probably in an instance where the person they're talking to is trying to gain more
information and leverage over them."*
*"Possibly if that person is younger and doesn't know how to deal with their mental
health in a better way."*
"Gaslighting"
*"If someone had posted something when their mental health was at an all-time low and
did not really know what they were either saying or doing online."*
*"When you are in a very dark place and you just don't feel like explaining over and over
again."*

        Diffusing Responsibility. Among the participants in the current study, diffusing

responsibility manifested as creating a group mentality where there once was none. Eight

participants had responses that fit this description and their answers are below:

"If I know the person that is exaggerating personally."
"When said person has no one to talk to and is trying to reach for attention."
*"I think exaggerating such things online is usually a cry for help or attention; I
personally would have to be in quite a different place for me to do so. It would likely
require me to have lost touch with all or most of my close friends and family, for
whatever reason not do well interacting in other social settings, and in essence, just
being very lonely and in need of attention/help."*
"I would do it if someone else talked about their mental health to try and relate to them."
*"If you were uncomfortable sharing what you're truly dealing with I can understand
lying."*
"Whenever people ask if I'm okay."
"If I [saw] a group of others."
*"Only if there was a bigger, underlying mental health issue that couldn't be exclaimed
online. Also, to maybe get as much attention as possible if you have nowhere else to go."*

        Distorting Consequences. Eight individuals in this participant pool fit into this

category with their responses, indicating they had some sort of cognitive distortion to

their perceived outcome of lying online. Often, they believe there is some sort of personal

gain they will receive or a personal benefit that will result from their lying. Example

answers are given below:

"I would exaggerate the importance of mental health so others can understand and agree."
"I have never done this, but the thought has crossed my mind to exaggerate my personal mental health status in order to get an assignment extended if I was struggling a little bit, but at this point I feel like I would need it."
"For personal or financial gain."
"To avoid negative/demeaning feedback."
"Potentially I would justify exaggerating about mental health online if it is done as a way of coping with trauma and trying to seek help."

       Lack of Social Support. Within this specific question, 20 participants answered

in a manner that indicated a perceived lack of social support. Some answers included:

"When I've been going through a hard time."
"Again, probably a circumstance where there was a horrific and sudden tragedy. That's usually a cry for help in my opinion."
"If someone were to exaggerate/lie about mental health as a way to bring attention to themselves and a separate situation that is more difficult to discuss I would then justify exaggerating or lying."
"If I'm just going through something rough but not too major in my life."
"So that people will help you."

V. DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to understand the psychological attributes that contribute to the new phenomenon of online sad-fishing. Currently, there are no studies that have been done to unpack the traits or potential predictors of online-sad-fishing. The hypotheses for the quantitative component of the study were informed by the work of Naquin and colleagues (2010), Dang and others (2017), Marshall and colleagues (2020), as well as Scott and others (2020) and Li and colleagues (2017) which suggested that elements of anxious attachment styles, deceitfulness, narcissism, moral disengagement and preference for psychosocial distancing influenced manipulative social media behaviors such as lying. Thus, it was hypothesized that the psychological traits of anxious attachment, Machiavellianism and narcissism, or some combination thereof, would differ between individuals who would and would not engage in "sad-fishing" behaviors online. While the hypothesis was marginally supported, interesting relationships were discovered. The qualitative component of the study was designed to provided a richer understanding of sad-fishing by hearing from the participants in their own words. Using literature that has linked several psychological traits to social media use in general along with closely linked phenomenon to sad-fishing, this research's findings has uncovered new information regarding this specific social media behavior.

Anxious Attachment Style

To reiterate, anxious attachment style is a form of insecure attachment that manifests from a chronic fear of rejection from others in a social relationship (Hart et al., 2015). These individuals often exhibit compulsive tendencies in forming close relationships, particularly when interacting online (Hawk et al., 2020). In terms of

quantitative findings, Anxious Attachment Style was marginally significantly different

between sad-fishers and non-sad-fishers; indicating that individuals with a stronger

endorsement of anxious attachment style were more likely to exhibit online sad-fishing

behaviors, such as lying online about their mental health. Additionally, Anxious

Attachment Style was positively and significantly correlated with Machiavellianism

(manipulative tendencies in order to gain social status or approval). While this

relationship was not a hypothesized relationship of interest in this study, it is still an

intriguing finding that supports the hypothesized influence of attachment style on sad-

fishing behaviors, which tend to be inherently manipulative.

The relationship between Anxious Attachment Style and Machiavellianism

indicates that the more anxious an individual reports themselves to be in their

relationships with others, the more likely they are also to report more Machiavellianism

tendencies, such as controlling the situation and manipulating others. Hart and others

(2105) indicated that characteristics of anxiety, as well as avoidance, made up the

insecure attachment dimension. This dimension of attachment style led to individuals

having to "hyper-manage" their chronic fear of rejection. Therefore, it would make sense

that if an individual reports a more anxious attachment scale, they may also be more

likely to report a greater tendency to manipulate others in their quest to form a

relationship or bond. Furthermore, this could potentially lead to sad-fishing behaviors, as

indicated by the marginally significant difference of Anxious Attachment Style across

sad-fishing status. This could be manifested as the need to manipulate online content to

make others feel a heightened sense of empathy or desire to comfort them and form a

bond. This conclusion is supported by Hart and others (2015) as they stated that this

desire to *earn* others' affection relates to fundamental social-relational motivations, explaining specific social media behaviors.

Qualitatively, the results found in this research study speak to Hart and colleagues (2015) finding of the social-relational motivations for specific social media behaviors such as lying online for social gain. Within each question, this theme is evident with participants stating they would frame their lying behaviors in order to gain a specific individual's attention, exaggerating their stress to their friends on social media platforms to gain sympathy and support and when the individual feels isolated and unheard. Individuals who have anxious attachment styles are more likely to engage in these potentially problematic behaviors online, using social media platforms to validate their social worth (Hart et al., 2015; Hawk et al., 2020). As will be noted in later sections, intervention and prevention strategies should focus on this specific at-risk group of individuals to develop effective communication and emotional intelligence skills to enhance their face-to-face interaction with others.

Machiavellianism and Anxious Attachment Style

As seen in the responses given by participants in each of the questions, the theme of Machiavellianism is strong. Some participants reported manipulating their mental health status online in order to gain some sort of monetary or financial reward, a doctor's prescription for a medication or for an extension on an assignment. Specifically, the first question explored what individuals thought sad-fishing was. In addition to themes of victim blaming and attention seeking, individuals seemed to believe that it was a manipulative attempt to receive attention and sympathy. Those who tend to exhibit Machiavellian traits are also concerned with maintaining socially desirable reputations

(Marshall et al., 2020), an idea consistent with anxious attachment theories presented by Hart and colleagues (2015). Within question two of the qualitative portion of this study, the responses that classified as sad-fishing content showed, amongst others, themes of anxious attachment along with Machiavellianism; such that participants were disclosing they would manipulate content online in order to gain a closer connection or understanding to their peers.

Victim Blaming and Attention Seeking

The qualitative questions were imperative in uncovering and understanding *why* individuals might sad-fish, and this theme is consistent in the answers provided, indicating a level of attention-seeking behaviors in all qualitative responses. The beginning of this research stated that viewers of sad-fishing content are more likely to view the content as attention seeking, fake and manipulative. Li and others (2017) were imperative in unpacking what the victim blaming looks like on social media, and their theories are clear in the responses given by the participants of this research paper.

Issue Engagement and Attribution of Responsibility

As a reminder, issue engagement is concerned with how the individual viewing the sad-fishing content relates to the information being posted, how important they feel the content is and whether or not they find the situation the person is facing to be a risk (e.g., are they in imminent danger or have lost a loved one?) (Li et al., 2017). Additionally, attribution of responsibility simply places the individual posting the content at the center of the issue, blaming them for not possessing the appropriate coping skills to navigate the situation on their own (Li et al., 2017). This theme, while not coded for in the analyses, is consistent throughout the participants' responses and is important to note

as, again, this is new results into *why* individuals may turn to social media for support, *why* they may find the tendency to exaggerate, and what the general perception is of the community surrounding the individual posting the content. Participants in this study seemed to believe those who posted sad-fishing content lacked the ability to cope, did not know how to use resources and are playing victim to an unwarranted situation; themes consistent with Li and others (2017). Turning to social media in times of interpersonal stress is not deemed a societal issue, and therefore, those who consume the "sad-fishing" content are more likely to blame the individual for getting themselves into the situation (Li et al., 2017), as evidence by the participants answers.

Attention Seeking

As indicated in the results, 107 participants were classified as sad-fishers based on their responses on the second qualitative question. These responses in particular were strong in attention seeking themes. Noted in the introduction and as shown in the qualitative results, Marshall and colleagues (2020) original thoughts on attention seeking behaviors online, specifically with lying, are evident in this population. These researchers believed that those who reported Machiavellian tendencies engaged in behaviors that are aligned with gaining social reward. Quantitatively, Narcissism and Machiavellianism were positively and significantly correlated, indicating a relationship between attention-seeking tendencies and lying and manipulative behaviors. While these variables did not significantly differ across sad-fishing status, these themes were evident in the qualitative responses of participants in responses, particularly within question one. Furthermore, Naquin and others (2010) argued that, in addition to Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory, those who have a tendency to lie online and manipulate others do so because

creating false information online creates a higher level of psychosocial distance and therefore less guilt than if it were to be shared face-to-face. Specific to sad-fishing content (posting content exaggerating one's mental health online), this can be seen in responses where participants share they prefer to share online over face-to-face because they have the protection of a screen and have time to edit their content. Having the time to think through what they want to portray, the information they do and do not want to share and avoiding potentially negative interactions face-to-face all serve the Machiavellian and Narcissistic tendencies of individuals. While we are existing in a highly technological era, it is important to note that this may be the only form of sharing personal thoughts for some individuals. More analyses can be done in future studies to determine the interplay between these variables and how they predict sad-fishing status, specifically.

Bandura's Moral Disengagement

As a reminder, Bandura proposed that individuals who lie typically use one of eight mechanisms to reframe the immoral act in which they are engaging in (Dang et al., 2017; Detert et al., 2008; Somma et al., 2020). The results section detailed each of Bandura's Moral Disengagement ideals that are evident in the qualitative responses given by the participants. Seven of the eight themes were highly evident in the responses given by participants, with Attributing Blame being the most frequent reason why individuals would lie about their mental health online; Euphemistic Labelling was the second most frequent. According to Detert and colleagues (2008), attributing of blame is much like victim blaming: instead in this case, those who are *doing* the sad-fishing are justifying their act as the fault of *others*. Here, those who detailed how they would justify posting

the sad-fishing content are blaming others for not providing support, not taking them seriously or not listening to them in their time of need. These individuals are able to justify and remove their guilt of lying and exaggerating about their mental health as they are able to blame others instead of exploring whether or not they should be seeking other measures of support (e.g., online therapy, mindfulness training etc.). This interplay of victim blaming and blaming others indicates the complex nature of using social media as a form of social support during interpersonal stress.

Limitations and Future Directions

What this research did not explore is whether certain personality factors predicted different aspects of sad-fishing behaviors, as predicted by Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory. While Machiavellianism and Narcissism were hypothesized to predict whether or not an individual would sad-fish, these factors were not considered into each facet of *why* individuals would sad-fish. Further and more specific analyses can investigate the relationship between anxious attachment style and Machiavellianism and its impact on sad-fishing behaviors more in-depth. Future studies interested in investigated similar relationships may consider undertaking a path analysis approach to discover which variables relate to each other directly and impact sad-fishing.

Intervention and Prevention Strategies

Based on the responses of participants to the qualitative questions (specifically question three), it became clear that participants felt uncomfortable with face-to-face communication for a few reasons. The responses to question three were divided into two themes: seeking online validation and seeking interpersonal validation. The differences were clear: those who sought online validation wanted to avoid interpersonal interactions

and those who sought interpersonal validation specifically preferred the intimate human connection of being face-to-face. Whether this was due to feeling awkward to share information, wanting to avoid uncomfortable body language, not being able to understand certain facial expressions, wanting to avoid emotional outbursts, wanting to avoid eye contact and/or needing time to craft a response, it is clear that there is a need for communication intervention and training with this group of participants.

What participants listed as benefits of online social media platforms in sharing emotional content online (e.g., avoidance of emotionality) are part of the normal human experience in face-to-face communication. When interacting with others in-person, we encounter "emotional outbursts" and facial expressions we may not be aware of. Instead of using this as a reason to avoid these types of interactions, this is where individuals should become curious with the other and learn what those mean, how to build empathy and a better rapport with the person they are interacting with (Konrath, 2012). If intervention and prevention strategies can target this particular group of individuals (college students with a reported high use of social media platforms and anxious attachment styles), perhaps they can provide tools to build on communication strategies, interpreting facial expressions, providing emotional intelligence training in the form of understanding their own emotions and what they evoke and increasing empathy skills in order to understand another's emotional perspective.

Potential Effects of the Generational Gap

While the preference of online over interpersonal validation is clear in this group, there is the question of whether there is a generational effect interplaying with participants responses. In the group that preferred interpersonal validation during

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emotional distress, themes of fear of having their information for the entire internet to acquire, the fear of not knowing who would be viewing such content and feeling that age was a factor in feeling competent to talk face-to-face with another emerged. Additionally, this group felt that interpersonal connection provided more connection, fostered more empathy and provided space for free expression. It would be of use for future studies to determine if growing up in a generation where technology is at the forefront of communicating, socializing and often times parenting and managing down-time has an effect on one's ability to effectively communicate face-to-face. Impacts of social media use on empathy amongst those who would sad-fish between generations is another avenue to explore to further understand how technology has affected individuals emotional intelligence.

Potential Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

It is important to consider the potential impact the COVID-19 pandemic might have had on the mental health of the participants involved in this research. While this variable was not measured directly in this experiment, further research might consider including this as a co-variate or mediating factor. For example, individuals who have a more anxious attachment style might be expected to respond more negatively to the isolating aspects of pandemic-related quarantine, which could affect their relationship to the phenomenon of sad-fishing. Additionally, the current study found that participants tended to feel supported in their online interactions as compared to face-to-face exchanges. Given the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, this is an expected and almost anticipated outcome. Social distancing and quarantine guidelines mandate that individuals isolate and limit their social interactions, in turn limiting their face-to-face

interactions and connections (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). This isolation, in addition to the uncertain duration of quarantine and the nature of the pandemic (a new, unknown and at this time evolving virus) creates a sense of anxiety, uncertainty and panic (Park, Finkelstein-Fox, Russell, Fendrich, Hutchison & Becker, 2021; Rettie & Daniels, 2020). Alonzi, La Torre and Silverstein (2020) indicate that young individuals (aged 18-35) are an important target group as they have had the most disruption to their schedules (e.g., online schooling, no extra circular activities) and those with pre-existing mental health adversities have had their mental health care adversely affected, all contributing to a heightened sense of anxiety. Boals and Banks (2020) have also introduced mind wandering as a mediating effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, where an endless amount of worry impacts individuals', particularly students', levels of anxiety about news headlines, loved ones, risk for infection, financial stress, and job security. Individuals have turned to social media for support during this time, therefore the results of this study could be a reflection of the psychology of the pandemic.

While individuals have turned to social media for support and connection during this time, the consumption of negative COVID-19 social media content could also negatively impact anxiety levels of individuals in the age group of interest in this research study (Alonzi et al., 2020; Garfin, Silver & Holman, 2020). Interestingly, Garfin and others (2020) noted that this overconsumption of social media content in relation to COVID-19 information can result in a disproportional response and increase in help-seeking behaviors that may not be necessary. In other words, one may be inclined to exhibit some form of sad-fishing behaviors, especially if they already exhibit some psychological traits such as an anxious attachment style, in response to this pandemic.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis in the research was marginally supported, with Anxious Attachment Style differing between whether or not an individual would exhibit the tendency to sad-fish. While the other psychological factors did not differ between sad-fishing status, interesting and telling relationships were found both in the quantitative and qualitative analyses. At the time of this research study, this is the first study to explore, qualitatively, *why* an individual might be compelled to post sad-fishing content. This information is imperative to understanding the phenomenon more completely in order to provide the appropriate preventative measures and support tools to individuals who may be predisposed to post such content. Future research should adopt different analyses to incorporate a stronger predictability of sad-fishing status and the potential mediating effects of personality traits.

APPENDIX SECTION

Demographics

What is your age (in years)?

What is your biological sex, that is, your sex assigned at birth? (For example, male, female, intersex, etc.)

What is your gender identity? (For example, male, female, non-binary, etc.)

Are you Hispanic or Latino? (That is, are you a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.)

__ Yes

__ No

Which of the following racial categories best describes you (choose all that apply):
___ **American Indian or Alaska Native.** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.

___ **Asian.** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

___ **Black or African American.** A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. Terms such as "Haitian" or "Negro" can be used in addition to "Black or African American."

___ **Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

___ **White.** A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

Demographics (continued)

Which social media platforms do you currently use?

	How many hours per day, on average, do you spend on these platforms?						What activities do you do while on these social media paltforms?				
	0-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	5+	N/A	Post Pictures	Like and Share Posts	Post Written Content	Watch Videos	Other
Facebook											
Instagram											
Twitter											
Youtube											
TikTok											
Snapchat											
Pinterest											
Reddit											
GroupMe											
Other											

Adult Attachment Scale (Collins, 1996)

The following questions concern how you *generally* feel in *important close relationships in your life*. Think about your past and present relationships with people who have been especially important to you, such as family members, romantic partners, and close friends. Respond to each statement in terms of how you *generally* feel in these relationships.

Please use the scale below by placing a number between 1 and 5 in the space provided to the right of each statement.

1---------------2---------------3---------------4---------------5
Not at all   Very
characteristic   characteristic
of me   of me

1)   I find it relatively easy to get close to people.   _____

2)   I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others.   _____

3)   I often worry that other people don't really love me.   _____

4)   I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like.   _____

5)   I am comfortable depending on others.   _____

6)   I <u>don't</u> worry about people getting too close to me.   _____

7)   I find that people are never there when you need them.   _____

8)   I am somewhat <u>un</u>comfortable being close to others.   _____

9)   I often worry that other people won't want to stay with me.   _____

10) When I show my feelings for others, I'm afraid they will not feel the same about me.   _____

11) I often wonder whether other people really care about me.   _____

12) I am comfortable developing close relationships with others.   _____

13) I am <u>un</u>comfortable when anyone gets too emotionally close to me.   _____

14) I know that people will be there when I need them.   _____

15) I want to get close to people, but I worry about being hurt.   _____

16) I find it difficult to trust others completely.   _____

17) People often want me to be emotionally closer than I feel comfortable being.   _____

18) I am not sure that I can always depend on people to be there when I need them. _____

Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) -- General Population

This scale is made up of a list of statements each of which may or may not be true about you. For each statement check "definitely true" if you are sure it is true about you and "probably true" if you think it is true but are not absolutely certain. Similarly, you should check "definitely false" if you are sure the statement is false and "probably false" is you think it is false but are not absolutely certain.

1). If I wanted to go on a trip for a day (e.g., to the mountains, beach, or country), I would have a hard time finding someone to go with me.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

2). I feel that there is no one I can share my most private worries and fears with.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

3). If I were sick, I could easily find someone to help me with my daily chores.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

4). There is someone I can turn to for advice about handling problems with my family.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

5). If I decide one afternoon that I would like to go to a movie that evening, I could easily find someone to go with me.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

6). When I need suggestions on how to deal with a personal problem, I know someone I can turn to.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

7). I don't often get invited to do things with others.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

8). If I had to go out of town for a few weeks, it would be difficult to find someone who would look after my house or apartment (the plants, pets, garden, etc.).
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) -- General Population (continued)

9). If I wanted to have lunch with someone, I could easily find someone to join me.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

10). If I was stranded 10 miles from home, there is someone I could call who could come and get me.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

11). If a family crisis arose, it would be difficult to find someone who could give me good advice about how to handle it.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

12). If I needed some help in moving to a new house or apartment, I would have a hard time finding someone to help me.
____definitely true (3) ____definitely false (0)
____probably true (2) ____probably false (1)

Online Social Support Scale

Now, think about the online spaces you use above. Rate **how often** the following things have happened for you **while you interacted with others** online over the last two months. Use the following scale:

	0	1	2	3	4
0 = Never 1 = Rarely 2 = Sometimes 3 = Pretty Often 4 = A Lot					
1. People show that they care about me online.	0	1	2	3	4
2. Online, people say or do things that make me feel good about myself.	0	1	2	3	4
3. People encourage me when I'm online.	0	1	2	3	4
4. People pay attention to me online.	0	1	2	3	4
5. I get likes, favorites, upvotes, views, etc. online.	0	1	2	3	4
6. I get positive comments online.	0	1	2	3	4
7. When I'm online, people tell me they like the things I say or do.	0	1	2	3	4
8. Online, people are interested in me as a person.	0	1	2	3	4
9. People support me online.	0	1	2	3	4
10. When I'm online, people make me feel good about myself.	0	1	2	3	4
11. When I'm online, I talk or do things with other people.	0	1	2	3	4
12. People spend time with me online.	0	1	2	3	4
13. People hang out and do fun things with me online.	0	1	2	3	4
14. Online, I belong to groups of people with similar interests.	0	1	2	3	4
15. People talk with me online about things we have in common.	0	1	2	3	4
16. Online, I connect with people who like the same things I do.	0	1	2	3	4
17. I am part of groups online.	0	1	2	3	4
18. When I'm online, people joke and kid around with me.	0	1	2	3	4
19. People relate to me through things I say or do online.	0	1	2	3	4
20. Online, people make me feel like I belong.	0	1	2	3	4
21. When I'm online, people give me useful advice.	0	1	2	3	4
22. Online, people provide me with helpful information.	0	1	2	3	4
23. If I had a problem, people would help me online by saying what they would do.	0	1	2	3	4
24. Online, people would tell me where to find help if I needed it.	0	1	2	3	4
25. People help me learn new things when I'm online.	0	1	2	3	4
26. People offer suggestions to me online.	0	1	2	3	4
27. People tell me things I want to know online.	0	1	2	3	4
28. When I'm online, people help me understand my situation better.	0	1	2	3	4
29. If I had a problem, people would share their point of view online.	0	1	2	3	4
30. People help me see things in new ways when I'm online.	0	1	2	3	4
31. People online would help me with money or other things if I needed it.	0	1	2	3	4
32. When I'm online, people help me with school or work.	0	1	2	3	4
33. Online, people help me get things done.	0	1	2	3	4
34. If I needed a hand doing something, I go online to find people who will help out.	0	1	2	3	4
35. Online, people offer to do things for me.	0	1	2	3	4
36. Online, people help me with causes or events that I think are important.	0	1	2	3	4
37. When I'm online, people have offered me things I need.	0	1	2	3	4
38. When I need something, I go online to find someone who might lend it to me.	0	1	2	3	4
39. When I need a hand with school or work things, I get help from others online.	0	1	2	3	4
40. I contact people online to get help or raise money for things I think are important.	0	1	2	3	4

Short Dark Triad – Machiavellianism

Rate your agreement with each statement using a 5-point scale:

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

1. It's not wise to let people know your secrets.
2. Whatever it takes, you must get the important people on your side.
3. Avoid direct conflict with others because they may be useful in the future.
4. Keep a low profile if you want to get your way.
5. Manipulating the situation takes planning.
6. Flattery is a good way to get people on your side.
7. I love it when a tricky plan succeeds.

NPI-16

Read each pair of statements below and place an "X" by the one that comes closest to describing your feelings and beliefs about yourself. You may feel that neither statement describes you well, but pick the one that comes closest. **Please complete all pairs**.

1. ___ It makes me uncomfortable to be the center of attention
   ___ I really like to be the center of attention

2. ___ I think I am a special person
   ___ I am no better or no worse than most people

3. ___ Sometimes I tell good stories
   ___ Everybody likes to hear my stories

4. ___ I insist upon getting the respect that is due me
   ___ I usually get the respect that I deserve

5. ___ I like having authority over people
   ___ I don't mind following orders

6. ___ I hope I am going to be successful
   ___ I am going to be a great person

7. ___ I can make anybody believe anything I want them to
   ___ People sometimes believe what I tell them

8. ___ I like to do things for other people
   ___ I expect a great deal from other people

9. ___ I prefer to blend in with the crowd
   ___ I like to be the center of attention

10. ___ I am an extraordinary person
    ___ I am much like everybody else

11. ___ Sometimes I am not sure of what I am doing
    ___ I always know what I am doing

12. ___ I find it easy to manipulate people
    ___ I don't like it when I find myself manipulating people

13. ___ People always seem to recognize my authority
    ___ Being an authority doesn't mean that much to me

14. ___ When people compliment me I sometimes get embarrassed
    ___ I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so

15. ___ I am apt to show off if I get the chance
    ___ I try not to be a show off

16. ___ There is a lot that I can learn from other people
    ___ I am more capable than other people

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