



Fashion-Depression: Understanding Users' Motivations for and the Effects of Depressive Social Media Posts

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Abstract

Depression has become a major global health issue, and its prevalence is rapidly increasing. At the same time, use of social media has grown, offering a platform of emotional expression and social interaction. In this environment, a new phenomenon called Fashion-Depression has emerged, where users repeatedly post depressive content online to seek sympathy, attention, or validation through self-disclosure. This paper analyzes the psychological motives of Fashion-Depression and its social effects on both posters and viewers. By reviewing existing literature, this paper concludes that individuals post Fashion-Depression content to seek social support, reduce loneliness, or create online identity. While such posts might generate positive empathy and virtual social support, they may also lead to oversharing, psychological dependency, and vulnerability to cyberbullying. For the audience, seeing repeated depressive content can provoke skepticism and reduce trust towards such posters. This paper concludes that although Fashion-Depression can be an emotional coping strategy, it also elicits negative social attitudes toward mental illness. Future research and education must aim to promote digital empathy users toward healthier forms of expression in the online community.

Introduction

Depression has become a prevalent mental health illness around the globe. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 332 million people in the world have depression (Global Burden of Diseases, 2021; WHO 2025). As it can lead to suicide and different related health problems, early prevention and cure strategies are demanded. In 2021, an estimated 727,000 people lost their lives to suicide. Also, depression prevalence increased in people aged 12 and older across the 10-year period from 2013 to 2023, suggesting that this issue is becoming more dire (Brody et al., 2025).

Along with the increase in depression, use of social media has increased. Social media provides people a platform to share personal updates, photos, and locations while interacting with others through comments and messages. This interpersonal engagement lets users express emotions and thoughts freely everyday (Wongkoblap et al., 2017). According to Statista (2025), the number of social-networking users is projected to reach 5.42 billion, with Facebook leading at 3.07 billion users, followed by YouTube (2.53 billion) and Instagram (2 billion).

As social networking platforms have become integrated into daily life, they also transformed how individuals express and communicate online by prompting users to express personal feelings, concerns, and mental states to large groups of audiences. For adolescents, these acts

as a coping mechanism and a call for empathy. However, some of these expressions have raised a new psychological phenomenon, described as *sadfishing*, which is posting dramatic emotional messages to gain attention or sympathy (Com et al., 2025).

Extending from sadfishing, the online phenomenon called Fashion-Depression emerged. Similar to sadfishing, Users express melancholic and depressive imagery of oneself rather than hiding. Despite Fashion-Depression's growing visibility on social media, few studies have examined in detail the psychological motivations or its effects on both the creators and viewers of such content. Most existing literature focuses on sadfishing or general emotional self-disclosure. Therefore, this study aims to answer the question: **What are users' motivations in posting about Fashion-Depression, and how does it affect both the audience and the posters themselves?** By researching this phenomenon, the research aims to explore how emotional disclosure, social validation, and public opinion interact online.

Social Media Usage of Teenagers

While technologies like radio or television are limited to a small number of activities, digital services such as smartphones or tablets are providing an exceedingly diverse array of activities, especially leading to an increased usage of social media in modern days (Orben, 2020). The rapid growth of social media is transforming how people interact and share information.

Many adolescents now also own devices with internet access. According to a study conducted in the U.S. by Pew Research Center (2025), 96% of teens ages from 13 to 17 access the internet everyday, and who report being online "almost constantly" almost doubled since 2014 from 24% to 46%. Social media acts as a platform for online identity curation for adolescents. They may contribute to building positive identity and mental wellbeing through control and creativity in self-expression. Teens interact with other people via different forms of digital interactions such as comments, updating posts, and messages, which strengthen relationships among users whether in different physical locations (Fathurohman et al., 2023). Moreover, they may even act as a learning tool as findings show that within education, the dominant themes of research on social media were used as a teaching and learning tool (Dennen et al., 2020).

However, not only positive outcomes exist. Potential risks are associated with social media use among adolescents such as sexting, cyberbullying and internet harassment, self-harm, and suicide (Reid & Weigle, 2014). As it is a platform that can show your identity, it may create pressure to maintain a positive image that is perceived by others. Research also highlights social comparison in the form of self-perception (Fathurohman et al., 2023), such as distorted body image that may contribute to anorexia and bulimia among teenagers (Akram & Kumar, 2017). Studies of the relationship between social media use and

adolescents' mental health is also increasing. For example, Ivie et al. (2020) found a small but significant positive correlation between adolescent social media use and depressive symptoms. However, further research needs to be conducted, as a review of Balkenburg et al. (2022) shows that many papers between social media use and mental health are weak or inconsistent, whereas a few qualified the same associations as substantial and deleterious from 25 papers.

Defining Fashion-Depression

"Fashion-Depression" is not yet a medical term; it describes people's tendency to dramatize their sadness repetitively on social media. "Fashion", acting as a prefix, is used to refer negatively to a person who inauthentically embodies a specific identity. Similar to how clothes are used to put on and off, online people put on and off such identities just to jump on the trend or attract attention—similar to the bandwagon effect: a tendency of people to adopt the behaviors or beliefs of others simply because others do (Leibenstein, 1950). The act of doing so only on the outside is compared to fashion, in line with existing expressions such as similarity and assistant. For example, people with slight knowledge about baseball but showing off as if they are an avid fan are often criticized as "Fashion-Baseball".

This term started to be referenced as a neologism in South Korea to describe people who exaggerate or express their depressing mood repetitively on social media—some even posting self-harm pictures. Looking at a case in Korea, in 2023 an elementary school student conducted an online "self-diagnosis of depression." Scoring high on the test, he diagnosed himself with depression and started to post pictures of his feelings and self-harm on Twitter. He later said, "It's good to get attention from SNS, and it's hard to stop because it's a habit." With the popularity of "depression self-diagnosis" online, teenagers who diagnosed themselves as depressed post self-inflicted photos of themselves on their SNS accounts, along with articles suggesting extreme choices (Kwon, 2023).

This term's concept is deeply related to the term "sadfishing." Sadfishing was a term first coined when Kendall Jenner, a model, posted an Instagram post emotionally appealing against her acne (Petrofes et al., 2022; Com et al., 2025). The posts were later revealed as a commercial collaboration, promoting a paid partnership skin care brand. After this, Rebecca Reid, a journalist, first coined the term in 2019, defining it as the sharing of very personal, emotional, or sensitive information online to attract sympathy or attention from others. They often exaggerate or dramatize their situation to create emotional "clickbait" for the online community (Cara Petrofes et al., 2022). Fashion-Depression is an instantiation of sadfishing as a social media trend in South Korea.

Psychological Motivation

The motivation of Fashion-Depression lies in users seeking social support or attention from others on social media. Social support refers to the help, comfort, and resources individuals gain from their social relationships, especially during challenging times or in everyday life which includes four distinct types: emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental support (Wang et al., 2025). Disclosure of negative emotions between users in a positive relationship can elicit emotional responses and reciprocity (Andalibi, 2019). Another study from Andalibi et al. (2017) shows that when people engage in online self-disclosure, many people comment with positive social support and include acknowledgements of emotions on posts that elicit such comments. As a result of this phenomenon, many users will intentionally post online to gain positive social support (Wang et al., 2025). It is also shown that individuals who perceive lower levels of social support are expected to display higher tendencies toward Fashion-Depression than those with stronger support networks (Shabahang et al., 2023). Users can gain support and increase liking which has made social media an enticing platform to fake depression as it provides easily accessible emotional support (Andalibi et al., 2017). However, the main factors for seeking support are highly personal rather than general (Petrofes et al., 2022). Factors like loneliness, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem each play a distinct role in shaping an individual's need for support (Com et al., 2025). This highlights that support-seeking behavior is rooted in personal psychological matters.

Effects on Posters

Social media serves as a suitable platform for Fashion-Depression, as anonymity serves to reduce concerns of public image and lower self awareness (Andalibi et al., 2017). With seeking support, finding others similar, and disclosing oneself, it has been becoming a space to comfort within one's networks (Andalibi, 2019).

In line with seeking attention, posters of Fashion-Depression may draw positive social support from online users. Related posts they share, such as posts with #depression, not only provides searchable terms but also a sense of belonging that connects, compares and helps the identified group (Andalibi et al., 2017). Sharing life experiences contributes to their overall well-being which allows active SNS posters to acquire emotional and social support from acquaintances (Wang et al. 2025). This creates a loop, when consistently posting about depressive feelings may become a representative "brand", unintentionally reinforced by the positive emotional feedback they receive for such disclosures (Andalibi et al., 2017).

In fact, a large portion of viewers comment or react to such posts with support. The empathetic responses indicate that Fashion-Depression may operate as a mechanism for obtaining digital social support, particularly for individuals struggling with loneliness or psychological distress (Com et al., 2025). In an interview with social media women users in the U.S. who experienced pregnancy loss by Andalibi (2019), some respondents responded that disclosing their pregnancy loss or reciprocating their disclosures often led to validation, destigmatization,

reduced loneliness, and new perspectives. However, the sense of solidarity can encourage people to seek constant validation, which heightens the risk of psychological dependency (Com et al., 2025). Thus, while empathetic content may strengthen support networks, it can also lead to oversharing of emotions.

However, revealing one's status does not always elicit positive social support. In the study by Com (2025), Com analyzed viewers' reaction to sadfishing posts. While positive comments did exist, sarcastic and humorous reactions also existed, reducing seriousness and emotional weight of the content.

People with depression tend to disclose personal information more frequently than those without depression. However, such inappropriate self-disclosure—that is, sharing negative information too frequently or excessively—can result in members of one's social network withdrawing their support. In fact, individuals with depression receive less social support compared to healthy individuals. The deficits in social support are not merely the consequences that posters share depressing content, but also factors that sustain and worsen depressive symptoms (Park et al., 2016). In this sense, Fashion-Depression may function similarly, as it can lead to a lack of genuine social support and even contribute to the worsening of psychological distress.

Also, active social media self disclosures increases the likelihood of being exposed to cyberbullying victimization. Perpetrators gain easier access to personal information about potential targets, which can then be exploited for cyberbullying (Aizenkot, 2020).

Repeatedly uploading Fashion-Depression posts can elicit positive social support from online acquaintances. However, this may increase psychological dependency on online support, encouraging posters to overshare their emotions. Frequently sharing personal information may eventually lead to a lack of support from others, creating a vicious cycle that may worsen depressive symptoms. Moreover, self disclosing on social media heightens the risk of being the victim of cyberbullying.

Effects on Viewers

Fashion-Depression can instill a negative image to viewers, which could lead those with clinical depression to be neglected or suspected of faking. In 2025, Senol Com and colleagues conducted a study analyzing social media viewers' response to a sadfishing related video by a TikTok user through comments. It was multifaceted, mainly classified into four categories: Empathy and Support Comments, Authenticity Concerns, Sarcastic and Humorous Reactions, and Advice and Encouragement Comments. It showed that it elicits a wide range of viewer responses not only emotional connection, but also skepticism (Com et al., 2025). This implies that while posters mainly seek social attention from such actions, they might actually be faced

with opposition. For example, comments may vary from supportive to unsupportive depending on the types of posts (Andalibi et al., 2017), which shows that social media often lacks context (Fischer, 2019) and leaves the viewers uncertain if a person is actually looking for support or not. As people do not like to be deceived, which makes them feel vulnerable (Rutledge, 2021), such posts lead them to devalue the poster and his posts and become chronically skeptical, which could lead to neglecting people who truly are in distress (Petrofes et al., 2022).

Sadfishing and Fashion-Depression can diminish the real struggles that people with serious mental health conditions, such as clinical depression, may have. For example, when Justin Bieber revealed about his mental health struggles online, the responses were mixed-some accusing him of sadfishing and some supportive. Numerous public figures, including politicians and entertainers, as well as ordinary people have faced such accusations of exaggerating their struggles for attention or to highlight certain issues. Wrongly labeling someone as sadfishing or Fashion-Depression when they are genuinely seeking support can seriously harm their mental well-being (Hand, 2019).

Sadfishing may negatively impact viewers and communities who suffer from clinical mental health conditions because sadfishing gives a negative image, it may ruin the image of clinical mental illness.

Discussion

People who fake depression online are mostly individuals who tend to seek social support and attention. However, the underlying reasons are personal and psychological thus it may vary by individuals, different ages, cultures, countries etc. Future research needs to define the age group and classification based on SNS usage trends to understand the effects of Fashion-Depression precisely.

Empathetic responses to such posts may provide digital support to uploaders, while it may lead to constant psychological dependency online. What kinds of reactions are classified as empathetic, and how do varying levels of expressed empathy impact the uploader? What specific mechanism makes uploaders depend on online relationships?

For viewers, while reaction varies from positive to negative, this mixed reception can cause an opposition effect, devaluating or distrusting such individuals. Future studies may focus on various mixed up reactions of viewers and the process of losing trust of such uploaders. How does uploading attention-seeking posts online affect the online relationship between users? What makes the viewers give positive, negative, or mixed responses? What accounts for these differences?

The distrust viewers build toward Fashion-Depression may lead to neglect of people who are having genuine mental health struggles. When the necessary support from others is needed, it

could be absent. Thus, addressing Fashion-Depression is imperative not only for the wellbeing of the uploader, but also for the whole society.

Considering the side effects of Fashion-Depression, some degree of standards for postings are needed. However, as social media is a platform for free expression, regulating posts that express depressive symptoms, whether fake or not, may be against the grain of the platform. Furthermore, it is very difficult to set objective standards. Therefore, in terms of the platform, the best practice is to restrict extreme Fashion-Depression content, such as self-harm, and to offer supportive messages like “Do you need help?” to connect users to help services.

From the viewers’ perspective, if one sees a Fashion-Depression post, it is more appropriate not to respond with ignorance or positive support but rather to consider the person's actual condition. Instead of providing social support online, interactions should be encouraged offline, as offline social support has been shown to contribute more effectively to overall satisfaction and well-being (Trepete et al., 2014).

As social media platforms grow, new behaviors and mental health issues arise. Instead of perceiving them as entirely harmful, society should focus on educating and researching ways for individuals to manage their use wisely and benefit from these technologies.

Conclusion

This study examined users’ motivations in posting Fashion-Depression content and how this phenomenon affects both the posters and their audiences. While attention-seeking is the primary cause, the analysis of existing literature on sadfishing and self-disclosure suggests that such online behaviors often reflect deeper psychological needs for connection, recognition, and belonging.

It is necessary to observe this phenomenon further for a more nuanced view of personal emotional expression online. Technologies, educators, and policymakers must work together to develop online environments that support emotional risk-taking without discouraging negative stigmatization.

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