

# Performing Trauma in a Digitized World: Psychological Horror and Fragmented Identity in Courtney Summers' *Sadie*

NAME OF THE AUTHOR: **Vidhya R**, Ph.D. Research Scholar.

NAME OF THE CO-AUTHOR: **Dr. M. Samundeeswari** M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Associate Professor

AFFILIATION: Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore.

## Abstract:

The paper delves into Courtney Summers' *Sadie* as a standout example of modern Young Adult (YA) horror fiction. It highlights the psychological and social fears that young people face in today's digital world. *Sadie* moves away from traditional supernatural horror. It uses a fragmented narrative structure, incorporating podcasts and multiple viewpoints, to show how trauma, identity, and digital communication come together. Through a multidisciplinary theoretical lens based on Erving Goffman's view of identity as social performance and Sherry Turkle's notion of digital selfhood, the paper analyzes how the novel depicts the difficulties of awkwardly negotiating authenticity, visibility, and vulnerability in mediated contexts. The horror in *Sadie* is not found through external monsters. Rather, it exists through real-world concerns like being socially invisible, judgment in public, and the consequences of storytelling through digital surveillance. The paper contends that *Sadie* indicates a shift in YA horror that suggests the genre itself may be well-suited to investigate modern concerns such as digital identity and psychological trauma, partly because it can provide a critical understanding of troubling aspects of adolescents' lives in an age defined by social connectedness while also being characterized by fragmentation. The paper enhances interdisciplinary discussions in YA literature, horror studies, and digital culture by improving our understanding of how contemporary fictions depict adolescents' experiences regarding identity, visibility, and selfhood (including the loss of selfhood) within a digital culture.

**Keywords:** Digital Culture, Horror, Psychological Trauma, Surveillance.

## Introduction

Young Adult (YA) literature has changed over the past decade, offering a vital platform for tackling the social and psychological complexities of puberty, particularly those related to the digital era. Self-presentation, visibility, and identity are now key topics in individual and cultural stories due to young people's greater use of digital platforms. Horror fiction, which has traditionally focused on supernatural elements, is changing to tackle themes of trauma, surveillance, and online visibility as part of the shift in young adult content. Psychological horror is prevalent in contemporary YA novels, such as Courtney Summers' *Sadie*, although it is delivered through social and emotional constraints induced by digital media rather than through dreadful or supernatural threats.

## Problem Statement

While scholarship on digital identity and YA fiction is expanding, much of the research continues to fall toward technological determinism or focus on genre-based elements like dystopia or supernatural horror. This leaves a considerable gap in critical analysis of the way real-world digital anxieties, such as visibility, performative identity, and social judgment, are represented in YA psychological horror. *Sadie*, with a unique podcast narrative and fragmented structure, provides an interesting opportunity to explore these dynamics.

## Research Gap

Current research in horror studies tends to emphasize supernatural or monstrous threats, while research in digital youth culture tends to focus on non-fiction case studies or social media behaviours. Very few literary studies have analyzed the ways YA horror fiction that does not rely upon supernatural elements reflects the psychological impacts of digital culture. This raises questions about how contemporary fiction reflects the internal, emotional horror of identity performance and media-mediated trauma among adolescents.

## Literature Review

### YA Literature and Adolescence

Young Adult (YA) literature has traditionally been a space for negotiating the ins and outs of adolescence. As Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000) notes, YA literature often has adolescent characters who grapple with and adapt to social power structures. More recently, YA literature has concerned itself more with real-world issues like trauma, mental health, and identity confusion in an increasingly digitally mediated experience. Scholars like Maria Nikolajeva (2014) note the increasing tendency for YA literature to reflect the fragmented and indefinable nature of adolescent identity. *Sadie* exemplifies this trend, with a main character whose identity is at once disrupted by trauma and through how her story is constructed for consumption through media.

### Horror Studies: Psychological and Social Horror

Classic horror studies have established a strong tradition associated with supernatural threats, monsters, or the grotesque body (Kristeva, 1982; Cohen, 1996). Nevertheless, many recent works have taken on the issue of horror stemming from an internal, or social psychological, basis instead of external, supernatural, or monstrous causes. Isabel Pinedo (1997) and Kendall Phillips (2005) have pointed out that horror works may articulate social anxieties, in particular those related to gender, trauma, and vulnerability. In the case of young adults, psychological horror acts as a dramatic representation of the emotional intensity of adolescent experience. *Sadie* reflects this more contemporary mode, offering an account of horror as invisibility, silence, and unresolved trauma, rather than purely traditional horror content. *Sadie* also provides some social commentary on horror by its podcast medium, pulling the everyday media audiences into the making or producing, and consumption of horror.

### Digital Identity Theory

Digital identity theory provides important tools to analyze how characters inhabit their identity in digitally mediated situations. Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation conceptualizes identity as performance, where individuals work to manage impressions in each social context and situation. This concept was further developed by Sherry Turkle (1995, 2011), who examined how digital life creates fragmented, performative, and contradictory manifestations of self. Turkle states that technology produces a culture of hyper-visibility, where individuals are engaged in constant curation of their identities, particularly among youth. In *Sadie*, the podcast space serves as a site of this performance, both for *Sadie*'s voice and narrative and the media host who is reconstructing *Sadie*'s story. The narrative trajectory depicts unstable boundaries between the public story and private self, indicating the emotional risks adolescents experience when their identity becomes content.

## Positioning this Study

While these scholarly fields, YA fiction, horror studies, and digital identity theory, are observed as separate fields of study with limited research that has connected them all, particularly in terms of YA constructs of horror without paranormal elements, much of the research is solely on paranormal horror or treats digital identity as a separate sociological phenomenon. The study builds on existing scholarship by connecting psychological horror and digital identity performance through the case of *Sadie*, considering how YA literature is beginning to approach fears centered on real-world contemporary anxieties related to surveillance, trauma, and emotional erasure. Instead of restricting it to a psychological framework alone, the objective is to convey how modern YA horror not just reflects the psychological stresses of being a teenager in a media-saturated environment, but also develops a socially relevant framework for reading horror in young adult literature.

## Discussion

### Digital Identity and Narrative Fragmentation

Courtney Summers' *Sadie* is a multi-layered story that oscillates between *Sadie's* tale and the podcast *The Girls*, narrated by journalist West McCray. This dual narrative form demonstrates what has morphed into a fractured digital identity for many adolescents who are growing up in a media-saturated space. In Sherry Turkle's (1995) view, digital spaces necessitate individuals, particularly the young, to create multiple selves for different audiences. For example, *Sadie's* voice is emotional with an essence of raw pain incorporating personal trauma, while the podcast version of her life is mediated, selective, and curated for public consumption. This tension between *Sadie's* private pain and public performance creates a dissonance in the narrative that parallels Erving Goffman's (1959) discussion of identity performance and the front stage and backstage, suited to the context.

This dissonance is sharply illustrated in one of *Sadie's* most visceral moments: She's dead... But she's dead is the reason I'm still alive. She's dead is the reason I'm going to kill a man." (Summers 29) *Sadie's* inner monologue in this line demonstrates the depth of her anguish and the raw, intimate desire that drives her search. Compared to the more sanitized and fragmented proffering of the podcast, the difference demonstrates how adolescent identity can become warped when projected through the lens of media and personal judgment.

### Psychological Horror and Adolescent Trauma

Instead of using supernatural threats to evoke horror, *Sadie* develops it primarily through its emotional realism and trauma. The true horror is in *Sadie's* experiences of grief, neglect, and abuse—real-life fears many young people might encounter. *Sadie* demonstrates some of the fears associated with psychological horror, which reveal internal instabilities, anxieties, and loss of emotional control. Affirming this idea, Isabel Pinedo (1997) writes, Modern horror is concerned with the breakdown of logic and security, and it most often has characters trapped in an ever-deepening space of ambiguity and discomfort. *Sadie* faces unending trauma, and her silence and isolation amplify the horror. As *Sadie* reveals, "There are some nights I can't stop hearing the sound of him. The way his voice twists around the room, dragging me back into a dark place I try not to visit" (Summers). This disturbing memory illustrates the psychological horror of the novel; it is characterized not merely by apparitions but by a deep and persistent trauma that undermines her feeling of security and tranquillity. The lack of closure in the narrative often increases the instability and loss of control central to psychological horror. *Sadie* is not haunted by ghosts; she is haunted by memories, systemic failures, and a lack of justice, all of which produce a horrifying atmosphere implicitly linked to the emotional and social experiences of youth.

## Social Visibility, Surveillance, and Authenticity

*Sadie*'s struggle between being visible and invisible along her journey reflects the tensions of being a teenager today in digital contexts. The podcast uses *Sadie*'s story to examine and deliver her life as a consumable product. This representation is similar to what occurs in digital cultures (and particularly for teenagers), where social visibility often counts, yet the overwhelming sense of emotional isolation abounds. As Sherry Turkle states in *Alone Together* (2011), digital life creates a false connection – people can feel “connected” in real time, but few feel like they are known (Turkle 87). *Sadie*'s identity is now under media scrutiny, which is being discussed, described, and debated; without being able to see *Sadie*'s identity and authenticity or any representation of it, while it is always seen through someone else's representation. This tension embodies the dual form of surveillance and performative pressure outlined in digital adolescence, wherein *Sadie*'s continual desire for a cohesive identity competes with the complexity of emotional experiences of reality. *Sadie* expresses this duality vividly: “I've felt the sting of being invisible and the crush of being too visible, all at once” (Summers). Meanwhile, the podcast underscores her continued elusiveness: “And *Sadie*, if you're out there, please let me know. Because, I can't take another dead girl” (Summers). Her disappearance highlights the painful tension between being in the spotlight and losing one's identity. It demonstrates how media exposure can escalate trauma as opposed to moving toward a healing process.

Through multi-layered storytelling style and authentically complex trauma representation, *Sadie* calls for a strong re-evaluation of YA horror as a genre. Rather than adhering to typical monsters, the novel has more urgent and experienced monsters: abuse, misrepresentation, and fragmentation, to name a few. Rooted in digital identity theories and psychological horror, *Sadie* communicates how anxiety-ridden the realities of modern teens (and to some extent adults) are when their identities, media landscapes, and identity relationships are mediated, observed, and commodified. Therefore, the absence of resolution in *Sadie* places the reader in discomfort, invoking a sense of horror in confronting how horror, identity, and media happen in adolescent life today.

## Conclusion

The paper investigated how Courtney Summers' *Sadie* reimagines the boundaries of Young Adult (YA) horror fiction through the narrative engagement of psychological trauma, online identity, and emotional invisibility rather than the fright of otherworldly horror. Using a fractured narrative structure that alternates between *Sadie*'s voice and a podcast investigation, the novel mirrors the fractured nature of adolescent selfhood in a digitally mediated environment. Using the work of Erving Goffman and Sherry Turkle, I demonstrated how identity is performed, monitored, and all too often misrepresented through media, making a space in which the horror of being seen, judged, and not understood emerges, not through monsters.

This analysis contributes to YA literary studies by positioning *Sadie* at a critical moment of YA literature that captures the adolescent experience (trauma, performativity, digital enactment) of contemporary adolescence, recognizes how deeply personal narratives of identity relate to online exposure, and creates a literary lens to approach digital identity theory critically through fiction, demonstrating how emotional consequences of online exposure and this fractured self-representation are so invested in YA literature. I also position this work as an expansion of the scope of horror studies by exploring how the frame of horror can also be constructed and squarely engaged through psychological and social horror, focusing on the ways adolescents simply confront fear, silence, and disempowered reality, often presented as supernatural, otherworldly elements in horror themes.

## Directions for Future Research

Future research should compare YA narratives with digital trauma or media voyeurism, examine media adaptations of YA horror, and study digital-native YA stories to understand how digital platforms shape narrative identity. Comparative studies with other YA narratives and digital-native stories can provide insights into how horror and identity change alongside technology.

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