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Behind the Mask: The Devastating Emotional Fallout of Catfishing

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Abstract

The world of dating is fraught with danger as scammers play on emotions to relieve their victims not only of their money but also of their pride and dignity. This paper discusses predatory behaviour exhibited by a common technique known as catfishing, perpetrated by those without a conscience. Catfishing occurs when someone creates a fake online identity, such as false photos, fabricated personal details, or stolen information, to mislead another person into forming a romantic or emotional relationship. The goal is usually financial gain or emotional control obtained by manipulation. This research provides an account of these individuals, including early detection methods, revealing some of their common attributes. It also outlines the full extent of the trauma they cause, demonstrated by case studies in which targets have been stripped of their money and emotional stability.

Keywords: Catfish, Online Dating, Scammers, Emotional Fallout, Manipulation, Trauma

Introduction

Catfishing occurs when someone uses false information and images to create a fake identity online with the intention to trick, harass, or control another person [1]. Often this is done to scam people out of money, blackmail them or harm them in some other way. The term 'catfish' has its origins in the 2010 documentary "Catfish," in which a young man, Nev Schulman, starts an online relationship with teenager "Megan", who turns out to be an older woman [2]. Two years later, Schulman hosted and produced a follow-up television series Catfish: The TV Show, on MTV, which ran for 12 years and nine seasons on the air [3]. The term catfish is now a widely accepted term for someone who exhibits this type of behaviour.

In one study, the consequences of catfishing were analyzed through interviews of sixteen college students who use social media and online dating platforms at a college and university in the US. The participants were all very familiar with the concept as, among the sixteen participants, nine said they were catfish victims, four said they were online impersonation victims and the remaining three admitted to catfishing other people online. In this paper, they revealed the stories of catfish and catfish victims. The conclusion was that catfishing negatively affected those surveyed in the use of social media, as well as preventing some of them from trying online dating services themselves [4].

Catfishers portray themselves as too good to be true, often on dating apps where they form online relationships to reel in their victim with the intention of scamming them. They may also coerce someone into exchanging nude or intimate photographs and videos, although the ones of them self will be fake. When they obtain those of the victim, they immediately try to extort money from them, threatening to upload the material onto the internet for their friends, families or work colleagues to see. This sexual blackmail is known as 'sextortion', and there have been tragic instances of this where the victim, overcome with shame and seeing no way out, has taken their own life [5].

As well as images, a catfisher may obtain personal information, enough to undertake identity theft and hack into a bank account. As soon as trust is established, the victim will be groomed by someone who is invariably skilled in their craft. They may even use a photograph of a very attractive person, even to the extent of being a celebrity or sports star. If they are believed, the victim will be flattered by the interest shown in them by someone so eminent.

Catfishing demonstrates the nature of the human self and the role it plays in deception. Understanding how people use the internet, especially social media, provides a useful insight into how personality acts on a stage of total anonymity [6]. In a sense, it is a reflection of their true character, their actions defining who they really are when disguised as someone else.

Methods

There is no shortage of devious techniques a catfisher can use to seduce their victim. Among these is to portray themselves as a uniformed soldier, the profession chosen to represent a sense of bravery, loyalty, and honor. Often, they are depicted as being deployed overseas or stationed at a remote military base. They prey on the sympathy and admiration that people have for those serving their country, using their emotions to manipulate their victims. These photos, often of handsome men in uniform, are carefully selected to engender trust and charisma, as many people look up to those in the armed forces, especially if they are an officer who exudes confidence, credibility and authority. Pretending to be a soldier has the added advantage of providing an excuse for not engaging in a video call, as they reveal that they are 'on a mission' and their position must be kept secret.

In one astonishing example, Farren Morgan, a married soldier, had his inbox inundated daily with messages from women claiming to be either dating him or to have been scammed by him. In one week alone in 2022, he found 72 fake profiles of himself, discovering that the scammers had used his photo to message hundreds of women. His fake persona declared that he was in another country and asked women to send him money for phone cards and flights and the like. One victim lost £3,000 [7]. In 2025, then aged 38, Morgan claimed to be Britain's biggest victim of identity theft as romance fraudsters had used his face and body 400 times to con women and were also using AI to send bogus videos [8].

Whatever the case, a catfisher will create a false account, complete with a fabricated background story that might include claims that the victim is 'a perfect match', their 'soul mate', or definitely 'the one'. There's no doubt that the victim will be flattered by compliments and may even be sent flowers or other gifts. Emails and text messages will soon flow, each one more loving than the last, all of which are designed to make the target feel good about themselves. Eventually, they will want to make the catfisher happy by doing whatever they ask.

When enough trust has been established, the abuser will often try to get their victim to undertake one or more of the following actions:

- Do them a favour
- Lend them some money
- Offer to invest their money
- Send them an explicit photo
- Reveal their most intimate secrets
- Ask for gift cards
- Share details about their family

These tactics commonly occur on dating websites and start small, gradually increasing in intensity if the victim is initially compliant. For example, the catfish may ask for a transfer of \$100 as they are running a little short of money. If their request is met, the next one will be for more, say, \$500, with some plausible excuse. The victim is now seen as gullible, and the catfish will be much more ambitious. Considerably larger amounts, many thousands of dollars, will be requested, accompanied by declarations that they are preparing a life together and the money is necessary to make that happen, perhaps to pay off some debts such as medical bills or loans. They may even send photos of possible houses for sale where they say they can start their new life together after marriage. These are all designed to demonstrate a deep commitment to the person they claim to love, but it is all a façade.

There'll come a stage when the victim simply has no more money to give and tells the catfish that they have run out of funds. It's then that the catfish disappears and blocks the victim on their phone, along with all their social media accounts. In reality, there is very little that authorities can do to retrieve any monies lost as the victim provided them willingly.

It is a similar story when it comes to exchanging photographs. The catfish will start by providing a picture of someone who is not them but much more attractive. A slightly more intimate photograph exchange will follow this, and before long they are sexually explicit, the abuser vowing beforehand that they are for their eyes only. Sadly, this often isn't true, and a threat is then made to expose them to a wider audience if their demand for money or sending even more intimate or sexually explicit photos is not met. The golden rule is not to give in to this sextortion but to report them and

get assistance.

Signs

An indication that somebody is being catfished is when the conversation becomes sexual very quickly. Another warning sign is when a person sounds too perfect, in that they match exactly your interests in music, books, hobbies and movies. Is it possible that they could have obtained this information from your own social media? Do they seem to know too many things about you that make you feel uncomfortable? Do they request that you move the conversation to another app?

It is common for a catfish to ask their victim to move to a private channel or direct messaging or one of the chat apps such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, Telegram, LINE, WeChat or Facebook Messenger. It is here that they can find out even more personal details, and it can be a signal that they're trying to get enough information to work out passwords and steal their identity.

If anyone you connect with makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe, then either pause or stop the conversation while you conduct an image search, such as Tin Eye, and look for other warning signs. All conversations should move at your pace and, if the other party is genuine, they will not pressure you. Check all your online accounts for any suspicious activity or signs that someone else may be using them, and take steps to protect your personally identifiable information if you are suspicious at any stage.

There are numerous cases where individuals have been convicted of catfishing and sent to prison as a consequence of their actions. In others it has led to the death of the victim. Some prominent examples are outlined below.

Case Study No. 1

In a tragic example, a 26-year-old male computer scientist from Northern Ireland, Alexander McCartney, was described as a "relentless and cruel" predator who blackmailed girls around the world. The former computer science student was sentenced to at least 20 years in prison in 2024 after being convicted of the manslaughter of a 12-year-old girl, American teenager Cimarron Thomas, who tragically took her own life using her father's handgun to end the 'sadistic' campaign of abuse she endured. Eighteen months later, her father also committed suicide.

Pretending to be a teenage girl, McCartney reportedly carried out catfishing attacks on 3,500 female victims whom he encouraged to send intimate photos or engage in sex acts, then extorted them by threatening to share the images. At a hearing at Belfast Crown Court, he pleaded guilty to the manslaughter of the girl at her home in Bruceton Mills, West Virginia, in 2018 and was sentenced to life in prison [9].

Case Study No. 2

In another instance, in 2017, a 34-year-old male Navy SEAL Team 6 member was jailed for 30 days in a military prison, along with receiving a US\$500 fine and a reduction in rank to petty officer second class, after being convicted of indecent conduct for catfishing three women. The court heard that the catfish had impersonated a female dietitian hired by Naval Special Warfare Development Group to get women to send him naked photos. He had used a text messaging app to create a fake phone number, with his female victims including two civilians and an aircrew survival equipmentman second class [10].

Case Study No. 3

In a case that began in 2009 and attracted much media attention, a marketing executive and former radio presenter in London, Kirat Assi, was excited when a handsome cardiologist who called himself "Bobby", with whom she had friends in common, reached out to her via a Facebook request. He claimed to be part of Kirat's Sikh community, and soon their online chats became a romantic love story. After years of correspondence, Kirat had still never met him, as Bobby provided bizarre reasons why they couldn't do so, including that he'd had a stroke, suffered from a life-threatening illness, had been shot or had entered witness protection.

The situation continued for an astonishing nine years, during which Bobby monitored Kirat's movements, telling her how to dress and dictating her social interactions. It all unraveled when Kirat made an unsuccessful attempt to meet Bobby at a Kensington hotel, where the receptionist confirmed no one by that name had checked in.

Her suspicions aroused, Kirat reached out to Bobby for an explanation, which resulted in his claim that he had instructed the hotel to withhold his details and deny his presence. Now well and truly skeptical, after 10 years of correspondence, Kirat hired a private investigator who traced Bobby to an address in Brighton. When she arrived, there was indeed a man named Bobby living there, standing next to his wife. Kirat showed him her phone with the photo of the man she believed was Bobby, and he immediately recognized himself. Shocked, Bobby denied ever communicating with her. So, who was the Bobby with whom she had been communicating all this time?

Kirat confronted her female cousin, Simran Bhogal, who advised her to leave Brighton. The following day, Simran came to Kirat's house and admitted she had been posing as Bobby all along. Simran, who was aged only 17 when she began

the deception. had been the mastermind behind everything, inventing over 60 fictional characters, including fake family and friends. She supported Kirat through the romance, and the story was so shocking that it was a hit for the podcast maker Tortoise in 2021, and later in the Netflix documentary *Sweet Bobby: My Catfish Nightmare*, where she recounts her experience.

To date, Simran has not faced any criminal charges for her involvement in the catfishing case, as catfishing is not a criminal offence in the UK. In 2020, Kirat filed a civil suit against Simran, resulting in a settlement in 2021 in which Simran reportedly paid substantial damages and sent a private apology letter. The reasons for Simran's behaviour have not been revealed publicly, as she consistently describes the matter as a "private family dispute" [11].

Case Study No. 4

Another case that received much publicity in Australia involved the popular singer Casey Donovan soon after she won the talent competition *Australian Idol* in 2004. She was only aged 16 when the romance started by telephone with someone calling themselves "Campbell" ringing her on Australia Day, 26 January, in 2005 while she was touring. Casey admitted that she was an overweight teenager and it didn't take long for her to be enchanted with the mysterious stranger. In an interview with the magazine *New Idea*, she revealed that she wondered what on earth he saw in her and, as this was Casey's first boyfriend, it was something that she had always wanted [12].

Whenever she tried to meet Campbell in real life, he always made convenient excuses, including, among others, that he had to go to Queensland to look after his sick aunt, his car wasn't working, his cousin died, or his sister was pregnant. In her book *Big, Beautiful and Sexy*, Donovan wrote that Campbell introduced her to a woman called Olga with whom she soon became close friends and acted as a mediator for the couple. Bizarrely, Campbell insisted that Donovan sleep with Olga.

Astonishingly, Casey's relationship with Campbell lasted six years, throughout which time they had never met in person. It all unraveled when Casey found a SIM card that supposedly belonged to Campbell in Olga's room. Casey confronted Olga, who finally admitted that the whole thing was a lie, and that Casey had been catfished. There never was a Campbell, and everything came from Olga, who never disclosed why she did it.

In an interview, Casey summed up the feelings of many people who have been the victim of a catfish. "I don't want anyone to have to go through something like that ever. The betrayal, the distrust, the emotional heartache, the feeling like you're going crazy, that you can't get out" [13].

Case Study No. 5

An appalling and tragic case of catfishing played out before the NSW Deputy State Coroner, Elaine Truscott, in Australia in 2013. It was found that Camila Zeidan, 27, deliberately catfished a trained hairdresser and receptionist, her close friend from high school, Renae Marsden, 20, by masquerading as an adoring prison lover so she could manipulate her. Camilla had posed as a male jail inmate she named 'Brayden Spiteri', a supposed Goulburn correctional centre prisoner, communicating as him with Renae via text and Facebook on a specially bought BlackBerry phone. She even provided a fake photograph of a man who was unknown to either woman.

Brayden, who Renae had never met, was supposedly a graduate of the exclusive King's School in Sydney and jailed after being involved in a motorbike accident. Brayden and Renae 'dated' online for 18 months, exchanging more than 11,000 text messages. Brayden claimed that he had traded away his prison visitation rights for a softer sentence, thereby explaining she was unable to see him.

Renae fell in love with Brayden and had hopes that, when he was released from prison, they would be married. Camilla told Renae numerous lies that, according to the coroner, had "amplified ... the pain" of Renae's family, and that her "lack of co-operation" had resulted in "further torment" of the family's suffering.

Renae finally received a text from Camilla, masquerading as Brayden, in which was written "I think I need a break and so do you", essentially ending their relationship. The court heard that Camilla exacted her ultimate revenge by making Brayden break Renae's heart. The coroner provided a motive in that Camilla, acting as Brayden, had orchestrated the deception so Renae would no longer have men, including her two fiancés, as competition. She added that "Camilla freed herself of the jealousy and possessiveness she felt by Renae being in a relationship with a man. She no longer needed to compete with one of Renee's boyfriends ... (she could) exercise coercion and control of Renae as Brayden".

On hearing the break-up news from Brayden, Renae was reportedly "shaking and crying", telling a work colleague that her boyfriend was "being blunt". Within hours, Renae got dressed, put on make-up, drove to The Gap, a high cliff at Watson's Bay in Sydney's south, and wrote on the windows of her car that she loved Brayden. After placing her shoes neatly in a gun turret, Renae sent three text messages to her mother, Brayden and Camilla, from the cliff top. It was concluded that she then threw her phone off the cliff and then, shortly thereafter, herself. Her body has never been found. Her internet search history in the weeks before her death included websites for bridal dresses and photographers [14]. The Coroner's report stated that:

Renae Marsden deliberately slipped from the clifftop with the intent to end her life after the termination of a relationship with a person whose identity and intent were, unbeknownst to her, a fabrication created and perpetrated for the purposes of exercising coercion and control over her by a known person, who engaged in conduct known as "Catfishing" [15].

Discussion

Catfishing has emerged as a significant social and psychological issue in society, especially in digital environments. It carries substantial consequences for victims, and even perpetrators, as well as the broader online community. The practice is not only an interpersonal deception but a phenomenon with far reaching implications for emotional wellbeing, financial security, and trust.

One of the most devastating consequences of catfishing is the resulting trauma experienced by victims. Individuals who engage with a false identity scammer usually invest considerable emotional labour into what they believed to be an authentic relationship. When the deception is uncovered, victims often felt betrayed, humiliated, and grief-stricken [16]. The psychological distress associated with such manipulation can lead to anxiety, depression and long term difficulties forming trusting relationships. The emotional fallout resembles the trauma associated with relational loss, intensified by the realisation that the relationship itself was constructed on lies [17].

Apart from causing a great deal of harm, catfishing can result in significant financial and personal manipulation. When it forms part of a romance scam, it has become one of the fastest growing online crimes internationally. According to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, Australians lost over AUD28.6 million to romance swindles in 2025 alone, affecting over 1300 victims [18]. Targets may be persuaded to transfer money, disclose sensitive personal information, or share intimate images that can later be used for coercion or blackmail. These forms of abuse constitute serious violations of privacy, often leaving victims with long lasting financial and psychological consequences [19].

Catfishing can damage a victim's reputation when perpetrators use stolen images or masquerade as them. This type of identity theft can expose innocent people to harassment or unwanted contact. In some cases, impersonation may impact employment opportunities or personal relationships, especially when the stolen identity becomes associated with inappropriate or fraudulent behaviour [20]. The misuse of another person's identity is not only morally corrupt but may also constitute criminal conduct under laws relating to identity fraud and digital pretence.

The social consequences of catfishing are significant, as when the awareness of digital deception increases, users may become more sceptical of online interactions. This can undermine trust in digital communication platforms and interpersonal relationships. It also creates suspicion of online communities such as dating sites and social networks [19]. It is essential that platforms invest significant resources into verification systems, reporting mechanisms, and user education to mitigate the risks associated with deceptive identities [21].

For perpetrators, the consequences of catfishing can be both complicated and damaging. While some engage in the practice due to loneliness, insecurity, or curiosity, it is often difficult to keep up the facade. Maintaining a false identity requires sustained dishonesty, emotional manipulation and a good memory of the lies that have already been told. This behaviour can escalate into patterns of compulsive lying, social withdrawal, and psychological distress [17]. Catfishing is not a harmless activity for those who engage in it and can result in heavy fines or prison sentences if found guilty.

There are also important ethical issues surrounding catfishing, along with questions regarding digital identity, authenticity, and accountability. It highlights the inherent dangers in online communication and the ease with which technology can be used to manipulate others. The emotional, financial, social, and legal consequences demonstrate that catfishing is a serious issue that requires robust safety strategies.

Conclusion

Catfishing is now a recognized form of digital manipulation with significant psychological, financial, and social consequences. Victims often experience acute emotional distress upon discovering that a relationship they believed to be genuine was fabricated.

With often devastating consequences, catfishing creates conditions in which victims are manipulated into sharing sensitive personal information or engaging in behaviour they would not otherwise consider. Victims of this type of romance fraud may suffer substantial financial losses and reputational harm when intimate images or personal details are misused [19]. Such exploitation constitutes serious violations of autonomy and privacy, reinforcing the severity of catfishing [22]. Victim support mechanisms to mitigate the harms associated with catfishing must be introduced to deal with the problem effectively.

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