

The Psychology of Deception

DR QURATULAIN ZAIDI of Mind N Life looks at the insidious online practice of catfishing – what motivates the perpetrators, and the effects it can have on the victims.

I usually don't watch real life TV, especially where there are psychological challenges being presented. Television is more of a form of relaxation for me – Agatha Christie murder mysteries are my go-to!

However, given my passion for raising awareness around the impact of social media on mental health, I sometimes do end up watching programmes for work. I recently saw the new Netflix documentary *Sweet Bobby: My Catfish Nightmare*, and it was a deeply disturbing experience for me. The story shows the devastating impact catfishing can have on an individual's functioning and the severity of consequences of this awful phenomenon on both professional and personal aspects of life.

What is catfishing?

Catfishing is a deceptive practice where an individual creates a fake online persona, typically through social media or dating websites, to establish a false identity and deceive others. The person engaging in catfishing pretends to be someone they are not by using fake photos, information and sometimes even fake social media profiles to lure unsuspecting individuals into online relationships.

Catfishing is the intentional and malicious harm caused to another person, including emotional manipulation, exploitation and deception, by someone who is psychologically unhealthy and seeking a maladaptive personal gain.

Its impact is profound, and includes a range of emotional and psychological repercussions – including multifaceted long-term consequences to wellbeing

and functioning – for those individuals who are deceived or "catfished". This effects can be seen in the Netflix series, and I also see it in my patients. They include the following:

Erosion of trust: "Can I trust you – or myself – again?" One's own sense of self, self-judgment and ability to trust others can be severely damaged by a catfishing experience. The negative impact on self-esteem can lead to challenges in future relationships with self and with others.

Anxiety and depression: The betrayal and manipulation inherent in catfishing can initiate and/or worsen symptoms of anxiety and depression, manifesting as heightened levels of worry, hyper-vigilance, sadness or hopelessness.

Isolation and withdrawal: Social interactions can become challenging during the catfishing process, especially when you chose to be in "the relationship"; later, a fear of experiencing further emotional harm can result in feelings of seclusion and detachment from others.

Post-traumatic stress symptoms: In severe instances, individuals may exhibit symptoms akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the intense emotional trauma endured during the catfishing experience. These could include flashbacks, hyper-vigilance and emotional reactivity, again impacting daily functioning and wellbeing.



What can someone do if they have been catfished?

Practice self-preservation: This mode needs to be turned on with urgency; selfcare strategies need to be put in place and prioritised.

Turn to friends and family: Although it may seem hard at first, because some of these people would have been looking out for you and reminding you that your situation was perhaps not right, it's important to reach out to them as they had your back. Access your social support network and remind yourself you don't have to do this alone.

Set limits: Part of self-preservation is setting clear limits on your online interactions to prevent any chance of this ever happening again in the future.

Seek professional help: It's highly recommended to seek psychological support to process what you have been through and to navigate the emotional aftermath of being catfished. This can be essential in moving forward.

Behind the mask

Individuals who are engaging in this deceptive practice often have a myriad of underlying psychological issues, though of course this is not an excuse for emotionally and psychologically hurting others. Catfishers may struggle with poor self-esteem, using made-up identities to seek validation and acceptance they may not have in their lives. Lacking genuine connections might be challenging for them due to factors like social anxiety, past rejections or deficient social skills, prompting them to turn to deceitful means for companionship. Catfishing can also serve as a form of escapism, allowing these individuals to temporarily avoid the reality of the world.

Disturbingly, the act of manipulating others online may provide a sense of control and power that compensates for feelings of inadequacy in their offline lives. These challenges need to be addressed in a psychological setting to help these individuals.

Cancelling catfishing

This awful phenomenon has to be stamped out of society, but for this to happen, things need to change at both the community and government level. *Sweet Bobby: My Catfish Nightmare* illuminates the profound repercussions of catfishing; in instances of extreme emotional trauma of this kind, it becomes paramount for interventions to be established to aid victims who demonstrate the courage to come forward.

At a policy level, governments should prioritise implementing supportive measures tailored for catfishing victims. Here are some of the ways they can do this:

#1 Specialised counselling services: Initiating specialised counselling services designed to address the psychological trauma and emotional distress stemming from the deception experienced by victims.

#2 Legal assistance: Offering legal aid and guidance to victims navigating the legal landscape, aiding them in seeking justice and potential restitution.

#3 Education and awareness programmes: Launching educational initiatives to enhance public awareness regarding catfishing and its associated risks, and strategies for safeguarding oneself online.

#4 Victim support networks: Establishing supportive networks and online communities for victims to connect, share their stories and receive peer support during their recovery process.

#5 Law enforcement training: Providing training programmes for law enforcement agencies to deepen their understanding of catfishing tactics, enabling them to investigate such cases effectively.

#6 Reporting mechanisms: Creating accessible and transparent reporting channels for victims to report instances of catfishing and seek necessary support and intervention.

#7 Collaboration with online platforms: Working closely with online platforms to fortify user safety measures, detect and prevent catfishing activities, and extend support to victims caught in such deceptive schemes.

#8 Research and data collection: Conducting thorough research to comprehend the prevalence and impact of catfishing, facilitating informed policy decisions and the enhancement of support services tailored to victims' needs.

Finally, this case highlights the importance for governments to put in strong measures to hold social media companies accountable for ruining others' lives. Those companies should have a legal responsibility to put in place preventative measures for their users.

In November, the Australian government took active measures to protect younger users on social media, but there's still so much more that needs to be done all over the world, including in Hong Kong. We all deserve a safer and more trustworthy online space, and social media companies and governments have an important role to play in safeguarding this digital social space. **a**

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