



PROCEEDINGS



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J22 Catfish: How the Internet Can Lead to a Double Tragedy

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand how the internet and online applications adversely affect people psychologically, socially, and physically.¹ In some cases, controlling and aggressive behaviors can occur in the context of virtual interactions as cyber-dating abuse.

Impact Statement: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing the negative mental health effects, including distress, shame, and panic to anxiety, self-harm, and suicide, that can be experienced by people who have been catfished.

A 24-year-old man, described as handsome, sporty, and active, committed suicide by hanging. He had never exhibited any signs of mental instability. His parents searched for clues in their son's social media messages and texts and found over 8,000 messages on instant messaging platforms between him and a 22-year-old woman. For almost one year, the pair exchanged messages, always by text, without ever engaging in any phone or video calls or dates in person, although these were requested several times by the man. Dialogs mainly focused on the affective-sexual sphere with declarations of love, sexual fantasies, and planning of a long-lasting relationship, including marriage and building a family. In the last months, the woman's messages became aggressive through direct attacks such as threats, arguments, and insults against the man and his family. He became completely emotionally dependent on her to the point of being manipulated and continued to play along, begging for her attention and consideration. This psychological violence continued until he realized he was being catfished. The girl with whom he had been texting was entirely fictional, and the picture "she" sent him belonged to a differently named model. After discovering the scam, the man continued to ask for explanations in vain, receiving vague and aggressive answers for two months until he finally committed suicide.

After his death, his parents discovered that the false feminine profile was created by a 64-year-old homosexual man from a nearby city. They accused him of subjecting their son to a form of psychological torture and reported it to the prosecutor. Investigators found several fake female profiles in which he chatted with other men, inducing them to a virtual emotional relationship through jealousy attacks and threats.

The catfisher's psycho-pathological profile was analyzed. His behavior had traits of antisocial personality disorder and narcissistic disorder with malevolent and destructive connotations, as well as a constant tendency to affective manipulation malignant psychological manipulation implemented with pseudo-victimization.

The man was convicted of "impersonating a person" for personal gain according to Article 494 of the Italian penal code and only received a fine. Prosecutors opened an investigation into a possible charge of "death as a consequence of another crime," but charges were dismissed. Meanwhile, a popular Italian TV show produced a report about the story, tracking down the catfisher, who was easily identified in his small town. The man received death threats and insults and committed suicide a few days later.

This sad story shows that the internet and social networks provide tools that facilitate the creation of interpersonal relationships and communication between the members of a couple. However, negative effects have also been documented because people are more accessible and susceptible to being controlled and more at risk of interpersonal intrusion and harassment.² This is particularly true for people who use social media as an alternative space for online dating, allowing them to bypass feelings of fear due to the heightened level of trust in these platforms.³

In these cases, the criminological evaluation can permit an in-depth behavioral analysis of the relationship between the victim and the oppressor, where the laws and tools needed to protect people from catfishing could not be robust enough.

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Catfish; Suicide; Cyber-Dating Abuse