

What kinds of people 'catfish'? Study finds they have higher psychopathy, sadism and narcissism

February 16 2023, by Evita March



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Online dating has revolutionized romance, creating more opportunities to meet potential partners than ever before.

However, alongside the benefits is the risk of abuse, harassment, and exploitation. In late January this year, the Australian government convened a [national roundtable on online dating](#) to explore what could be done to improve safety.

[Alarming figures](#) compiled by the Australian Institute of Criminology showed three out of four Australian dating app users who responded to the survey had experienced [sexual violence](#) on dating apps in the last five years.

One such harm is "[catfishing](#)"—when someone creates, or steals, an identity with the purpose of deceiving and exploiting others.

In a [study](#) by myself and Cassandra Lauder at Federation University, we wanted to find out what [psychological traits](#) were common among people who conduct behaviors associated with catfishing. We surveyed the perpetration of catfishing behaviors in nearly 700 adults.

We found a cluster of psychological traits that are associated with catfishing—known as the "dark tetrad" of personality. This includes psychopathy, sadism, narcissism, and Machiavellianism.

So what are these traits, and how can you spot a potential romance scam?

What's catfishing again?

What differentiates catfishing from phishing and other online scams is the lengths the catfisher will go to to deceive and exploit their targets. Often, this includes establishing [long-term relationships](#)—with [some accounts of these relationships lasting over a decade](#).

For many of these scams, the goal is often financial exploitation. According to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), in 2019 Australians reported just under 4,000 romance scams, costing Australians [over A\\$28 million](#). In 2021, that number was [just over \\$56 million](#).

However, not all catfishing scams involve financial exploitation. In some cases, there may appear to be no real reason why the victim-survivor was psychologically exploited and manipulated—a form researchers have termed social catfishing.

The experience of catfishing can cause significant [psychological and financial](#) damage to the victim-survivor.

The 'dark tetrad'

In [our study](#), we recruited a sample of 664 participants (55.8% men, 40.3% women, 3.9% other/missing) via social media. We asked participants to indicate how often they perpetrated a range of catfishing-related behaviors. This included "I orchestrate online scams" and "I present inaccurate personal information online in order to attract friends or romantic partners".

We also assessed participants on a range of personality traits commonly associated with antisocial behavior, known as the "[dark tetrad](#)" of personality.

This included:

- [narcissism](#) (self-grandiosity, entitlement)
- [psychopathy](#) (callousness, low empathy)
- [everyday sadism](#) (enjoying harming others)
- and [Machiavellianism](#) (strategic and calculating).

We found people who perpetrated catfishing behaviors had higher psychopathy, higher sadism, and higher narcissism. Sadism in particular was a very strong predictor of catfishing behaviors.

We also found that men were more likely than women to catfish.

It's worth noting that in this research, participants filled out the survey themselves, meaning the data are what we call "self-reported" in research. As we asked people if they performed socially undesirable behaviors such as interpersonal manipulation, exploitation, and deception, a key issue is that people may not be entirely honest when responding to the survey. This could lead to bias in the data.

We addressed this by measuring participants' "[social desirability](#)"—the degree to which a person conceals their true self to look good to others. We used this measure in all of our findings to reduce some of this potential bias.

Previous research found those who catfished cited motivations such as loneliness, dissatisfaction with physical appearance, identity exploration, and escapism.

Knowing why people might catfish could be empowering for catfishing victim-survivors. Although the above motives may certainly still play a part, our findings add to the story.

6 signs of a potential romance scam

We found people who perpetrate catfishing behaviors are more likely to be callous, egotistical, lack empathy, and—importantly—enjoy harming other people. This suggests that not all catfishers are necessarily indifferent to the harm they could cause. Indeed for some, harm could be the goal.

There are other practical ways to identify a possible online romance scam. I have been researching antisocial online behaviors for almost a decade. Drawing on The [Psychiatry Podcast](#), and in collaboration with the Cyberpsychology and Healthy Interpersonal Processes Lab at Federation University, here are six signs of a potential catfishing scenario:

1. **They contact you first.** It's unusual for the victim-survivor to have made the initial contact. Typically, the catfisher will make the first contact.
2. **They are too good to be true.** Great profile? Check. Good looking? Check. Maybe even educated and rich? Check. The catfisher wants to look good and lure you in.
3. **Love bombing.** Prepare yourself for the pedestal you are about to be put on. The catfisher will shower you with compliments and protestations of love. It's hard not to be flattered by this amount of attention. You may also find terms of endearment are common—saves the catfisher having to remember all those different names.
4. **They never call.** There's always something that will get in the way of phone calls, video calls, and meetings.
5. **Strange communication.** There may be typos, delayed or vague responses. Something about this communication feels a bit off.
6. **They ask for money.** Money isn't always the goal of the catfisher. But any of the signs above combined with asking for money should be a red flag. Don't make any decisions before talking to someone—a trusted friend or family member. Often,

people on the outside have a clearer view of the situation than those who are involved.

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