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Catfishing: A New Technological Epidemic

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### **Catfishing: A form of online violence and how it can affect us**

In the past few decades, as we integrated technology more into our everyday lifestyles, individuals started to develop relationships through online connections. From this, Catfishing began which is defined as “a deceptive activity involving the creation of a fake online profile for deceptive purposes” (Clavio, 2017). They create an online persona that is based on falsified information, and it is not representative of their true identity. The purpose of this technique is to make themselves appear more attractive than they actually are in real life, though the person they are interacting with online is completely unaware of their deception. A lot of people can fall victim to this without even knowing. In 2017, “more than 15,000 people filed complaints with the FBI’s Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) alleging they were victims of catfishing and reporting losses of more than \$211 million” (FBI, 2019). These are just individuals who reported their incidence of catfishing just in 2017, the rate of individuals who have ever interacted with a catfish is much higher than this especially during the pandemic. Incident rates of catfishing continue to skyrocket, and reports of loss money/assets just continue to rise. With that being said, I am going to be addressing a specific case diving down into how dangerous these scenarios can be.

### **Overview of the Tragic Passing of Renae Marsden and why she passed**

The tragedy that I will be writing about is the case of Renae Marsden. Renae was a 20-year-old hairdresser who lived in Sydney, Australia and on August of 2013, her family’s life and hers would change forever. In 2011, Renae had begun communicating with a person who she thought was Brayden Spiteri and this lasted for 18 months. Renae’s mother revealed that she disapproved of the pairing, and he would send her not so nice messages but wanted to support her daughter. Tragically, in August of 2013, about 18 months after Renae had started what she

thought was a real relationship to Brayden, she came home from work one day to a text from Brayden saying he was ending things with her. After this, Renae's mother started to receive text messages from her daughter's then ex-boyfriend Brayden saying, "sort her daughter out because she was threatening to take her own life – but Renae was able to convince her mother she was fine" (Day, 2022). Later, her mother received heart wrenching text messages from her daughter apologizing for what she was about to do. Renae was later on reported missing, and police officers discovered her car a few days later. On August 5<sup>th</sup> of 2013, Renae Marsden went to Watson's Bay where people have been previously known to take their lives. Police found footage of Renae sending three last texts before throwing her phone over the ledge and then disappearing from the video.

After the events that led to Marsden's death, her father was able to take her phone and had realized that Renae's best friend Camila was the same person as Brayden. Afterwards, her parents gave the police her phone and they had found about 30,000 messages between her and what the police and her family now known as Camila (Day, 2022). A deputy state coroner named Elaine Truscott said that Camila's action is what led to Renae Marsden to take her own life. Camila tried to lie to everyone, from the police to even Renae's family. Camila acted as a good friend in front of other people but was accused of punching Renae, pulling her hair, grabbing the steering wheel while driving, and had given her several red marks and bruises on her (Sutton, 2020). Renae felt that Camila Zeidan had always showed obsessive behavior towards Renae when she was dating her fake boyfriend, Brayden. She would follow Renae around their town, she would turn up at locations where Renae would be and would sit outside of her house unannounced. After everything that had happened, it was even more odd learning of Camila's obsessive behavior towards Renae was most of the time because of a man that she made up.

Sadly, in New South Wales, there are no catfishing laws to convict someone for a crime like that. Renae's parents tried desperately to convict Camila for what she had done to their daughter, but they were unsuccessful, and Camila was not charged for any crimes. Currently, the Mardsen's are now campaigning to make catfishing a crime in Australia.

### **Theories of Violence: The General Aggression Model**

To better understand why Renae had tragically done what she did, we can take a look at the General Aggression Model. According to The General Aggression Model: Theoretical Extensions to Violence, "The more people think about dying by suicide, the more likely they are to die by suicide. In addition, diminished arousal to the pain and distress that are associated with suicidal behavior relate to higher numbers of suicide attempts" (DeWall, Bushman, Anderson, 2011). In Renae's case, her family and friends knew she had a history of suicidal attempts with serious matters that had to deal with who she thought was Brayden. In August of 2012, the year before Renae had tragically committed suicide, Renae had learnt from Brayden who we now know as Camila was possibly being granted release from prison. The next month, Renae ended up in a hospital after suffering from a self-induced drug overdose and later told her mother that her relationship with Brayden had ended and she was happy to be alive. With Renae's history, Camila knew that terminating the relationship would leave Renae devastated and could lead to her doing something drastic as she has done previously (Sutton, 2020). Through the General Aggression Model, we learned that individuals who have either contemplated or attempted suicide previously, have a higher likelihood of this occurring again in the future. Camila knew or at least should have had some sort of inclination to know that by ending the relationship between Renae and Brayden again would lead to something devastating. Camila got her ultimate revenge by severing her longtime friendship with Renae and then destroyed her heart by breaking up with

her as Brayden. She knew by doing this Renae would react in a similar way because she has endured and gone through this in the past already.

### **Theories of Violence: Rational Choice versus Frustration-Aggression**

To better understand why Camila could do such a thing to a friend, we will look at the “Rational Choice versus Frustration-Aggression”. The rational choice perspective assumes that aggressive behavior either has a goal or a purpose (Felson, 2006). Camila was known to be very aggressive to Renae as I stated before. Before creating Brayden, Camila was very distasteful towards Renae’s exes, including Renae’s ex fiancés. In order to end this, she created Brayden and no longer needed to compete with any of Renae’s boyfriends because now she became one of them. She used her newfound power while faking the entire relationship to maintain control of her friend (Sutton, 2020). The Rational choice perspective provides a reasoning as to why someone may make such a poor choice. Prior to her suicide, Renae suggested she was ending her friendship with Camila to Brayden, who was actually Camila and of course she would argue against this. Eventually, Renae had told Brayden that she didn’t want a friend like Camila and was officially planning on ending their friendship.

This was the beginning of the end, after this, Camila had texted Renae as Brayden and ended the relationship. According to Violence as Instrumental Behavior, rational choice theorist uses the word rational reluctantly because they know the word is bounded to a specific behavior. This behavior is by having a subjective judgement about payoffs and understanding that individuals often make careless decisions with outcomes that can be disastrous for themselves as well as their victims (Felson, 2006). In Camila’s case she acted with aggression or put herself in a condition to be ready to cope with a possibly threatening situation as better interpreted through the social learning theory (Lopez, 2021). Looking at this perspective mentioned in the Violence

as Instrumental Behavior, she was in a state of mind in which she may not have considered the cost completely of what she was about to do. But her actions and behaviors were still goal-oriented, and she ultimately made the decision to end the fake relationship she created with her best friend. People who act this way usually want to be treated fairly and they believe that people who fail to do so, should be punished no matter the consequences (Felson, 2006). Camila and Renae both exhibited acts of violence but both being for completely different reasons. Both which are explained through “the General Aggression Model” and the “Rational Choice versus frustration-aggression”.

### **The Impact that one Case of Catfishing had on the World**

Even after Renae’s death and in front of Renae’s parents, Camila refused to admit that she faked the whole entire thing. Renae’s case had successfully garnered global news and was being written in news articles in countries like the United Kingdom, but this didn’t last long. For a long while the media and society eventually forgot about Renae’s passing and moved on with their lives. Despite the fact, the Mardsen’s never stopped fighting for their daughter and finally more than six years later, they were able to get an inquest into their daughter’s death. This meant that there would be a further investigation into the facts relating around their daughter’s death. Thankfully this happening mean’s that the victim’s family may finally receive some sort of different outcome from what had occurred to their daughter. Even after Renae’s death, to this day there was still no specific laws in place that could classify catfishing as a crime. There are many different behaviors if associated with the crime, that could be incriminating such as financial fraud, identity theft, and even assault. Hopefully, with Renae’s parents being able to get the inquest for her death and all the support they received some change will happen and more laws or even attention will be brought onto catfishing.

## **Social Determinant and Risk Factors to Search For**

The social determinants that are most likely to be impacted by the event of catfishing would be a large majority of the younger population worldwide. Catfishing most commonly occurs through dating sites and social media accounts because this is where individuals can create a fake persona to win over a stranger's trust through deception. Usually, the younger population will embrace these creations and meet other people through technology. In some cases, catfishing can be innocent but, in many cases, it can be very dangerous and attract a population of individuals who are susceptible to falling victim to this. The individual risk factors that could increase a young person's chance of being affected by catfishing is high emotional distress, history of treatment for emotional problems and association with delinquent peers which is a peer and social risk factor (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2020). When an individual has a history of high emotional distress and treatment for emotional problems, they are more likely to become emotionally attached to an individual who could be catfishing them. In Renae's case she had a history of emotional distress and had received treatment for her suicide attempt, a year before she had successfully killed herself. She had become so emotionally attached to who she thought was Brayden that once he ended the relationship, she killed herself from the grief as she had tried to the year before. When an individual also has an association with a delinquent peer or multiple, they could be exposed to bad scenarios, environments, or problems that could negatively affect them in the future. Especially from the youth of our population who could easily be coerced because they just don't know better and could be convinced into downloading that dating site or talking to that one stranger from Instagram who messaged you who you have never met a day in your life. Renae's case was the extreme, her best

friend had not only introduced her to the fake boyfriend that she would fall in love with but, she had created him herself in order to garner control over her friend.

### **The ACES Study and how Resilience may be the necessary trait to prevent forms of violence**

The ACES Study is a public health study to possibly answer why an adult would respond the way they would to high stress situations. According to ACE' Too High, ACEs are "adverse childhood experiences that harm children's developing brains and lead to changing how they respond to stress and damaging their immune systems so profoundly that the effects show up decades later" (n.d.) In Renae's Marsden's case, she had developed a pattern of reacting too quickly and drastically in situations that made her unhappy. During both times when she had attempted suicide, she had made her decision in less than a day and decided this was the best thing to do, obviously it was not. Renae had most likely learned this behavior from either a family member or an adult in her childhood. She had learned that reacting and making decisions without much thought would be the best thing for her to do. Renae's childhood experiences could have made her perceive that the best way to react in those situations she had fallen into was by killing herself. Resilience is something that can be very difficult to obtain for people, especially those who may be more emotional. According to Harvard University, "resilience is the ability to overcome serious hardship, while others do not" (Harvard University, 2021). This is definitely a trait that Renae did not possess. She often times seem to have never weighed the outcomes of what she was doing. Renae telling her mother that she was happy to be alive after the first time proves the point that she had regretted what she had done and had not fully weighed her options out. A year later after having to endure the same high-stress situation, she hadn't obtained the ability to overcome her hardships and had attempted suicide again. With the youth population

being most at a risk who also have the risk factors associated, they are less likely to possess resilience that would allow them to properly respond to the situation presented to them.

### **The Short/Long Term impacts that Catfishing has on our communities**

Catfishing has not only a dramatic impact on the individual affected but as well as our communities. The short-term impact's that this can have on our community includes creating self-doubt, frustration, anxiety, and even revenge. When an individual in a community is negatively impacted by catfishing, this could impact the community in way by creating self-doubt and anxiety of what could be real or fake. A community could become enraged from what had occurred and could resort to violence from frustration of the incident and may want to exact their revenge on the individual who had done this to someone in their community. The more severe cases of catfishing that resulted in suicide or murders drastically impact communities more and continue to spread frustration and self-doubt. The long-term impacts that catfishing has on communities includes anxiety, impact on life changing decisions, uncertainty, trust-issues/self-doubt, and loss of time, energy, and resources. When a community is impacted by catfishing, they will forever hold a level of uncertainty, trust-issues, and self-doubt when making future decisions. They will commonly remember that someone in their community has been impacted by this and they will forever be questioning their decisions. Whether this is through social media or dating apps, when catfishing occurs in a community, they will realize that this can happen to anyone, creating these long-term impacts for them.

### **Agent of Change: Violence as a Public Health Crisis and how to Prevent Further Events of Catfishing from Happening**

A public health crisis is familiarly known as something that can negatively impact individuals or community health. Violence can come in many forms and can strike anyone at any

moment. Violence should be considered a public health crisis because according to Violence is a Public Health Issue, there is increasing evidence that show the several harmful effects that violence has on our communities. The harmful effects include violence on children's development, negative long-term health towards the population affected, and economic development of entire communities, especially those of color (American Public Health Association, 2018). Illness and Violence have no prejudice and can hurt anyone at any moment. We have seen with previous public health concerns and epidemics that as time has progressed, advances in medicine and knowledge were made to tackle a large majority of illnesses that once seriously impacted our world. Eventually, as the United States had become more successful in treating and preventing several infectious diseases and illnesses, homicide and suicide rose in the rankings of causes of death (Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). As illness grew short, violence heightened and became its own public health crisis in the last few decades.

As a future leader and Agent of Change, I believe what I can do to support a larger more sustainable goal of preventing individuals to fall victim to catfishing in our communities would be simply just to educate people. The biggest problem is that most people either don't know that catfishing is possible or doubts it could happen to them. A majority of the time, catfishing is never done out of revenge and usually done so in the pursuit of a reward, Renae's case being the exception. If individuals were educated on how to be more aware, they are less likely to fall victim to catfishing and successfully prevent themselves from falling into what can be a very terrible situation for themselves.

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