ALEX

CYBERBULLYING - CATFISHING

What is it?

Catfishing is a **digital phenomenon** that refers to the deceptive practice of crafting a fictitious online identity with the intention of misleading or deceiving others. This deceptive act is primarily carried out within various online platforms where individuals engage in social interactions.

The way catfishes establish contact with young individuals is multifaceted. They leverage the anonymity and interconnected nature of the internet to approach their targets. Catfishes may employ a range of tactics to engage their targets in conversation, including flattery, sharing personal stories, and mimicking the interests and behaviours of the youth they are targeting.
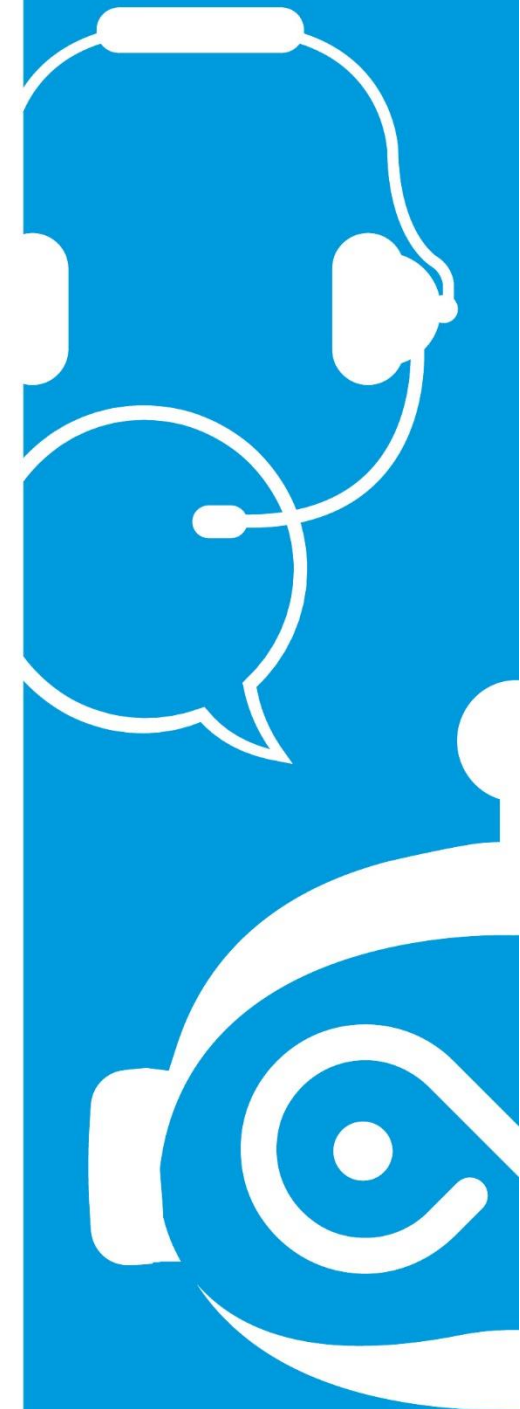
## How can it impact the sexual and reproductive health of youth?

Catfishing can profoundly affect the SRH of young individuals in various ways. The emotional manipulation often associated with catfishing can lead to a warped sense of trust and intimacy. Victims who were initially deceived by a fake online persona may find it challenging to trust others, especially in the realm of intimate relationships. This lack of trust can lead to difficulties in forming healthy, consensual, and fulfilling sexual relationships.

Catfishes may exploit the vulnerability of young people by manipulating them into sharing private, intimate photos or engaging in sexting, under the pretence of a genuine, trusted relationship. Subsequently, these deceptions can escalate into sextortion, where the catfish threatens to expose these intimate images or messages unless the victim complies with their demands. The sharing of explicit images or messages without consent, commonly known as revenge porn, can be devastating for the victims. It can harm their reputation, mental health, and even their future prospects. Young individuals may find it difficult to establish and maintain healthy sexual relationships due to the fear of potential exposure.
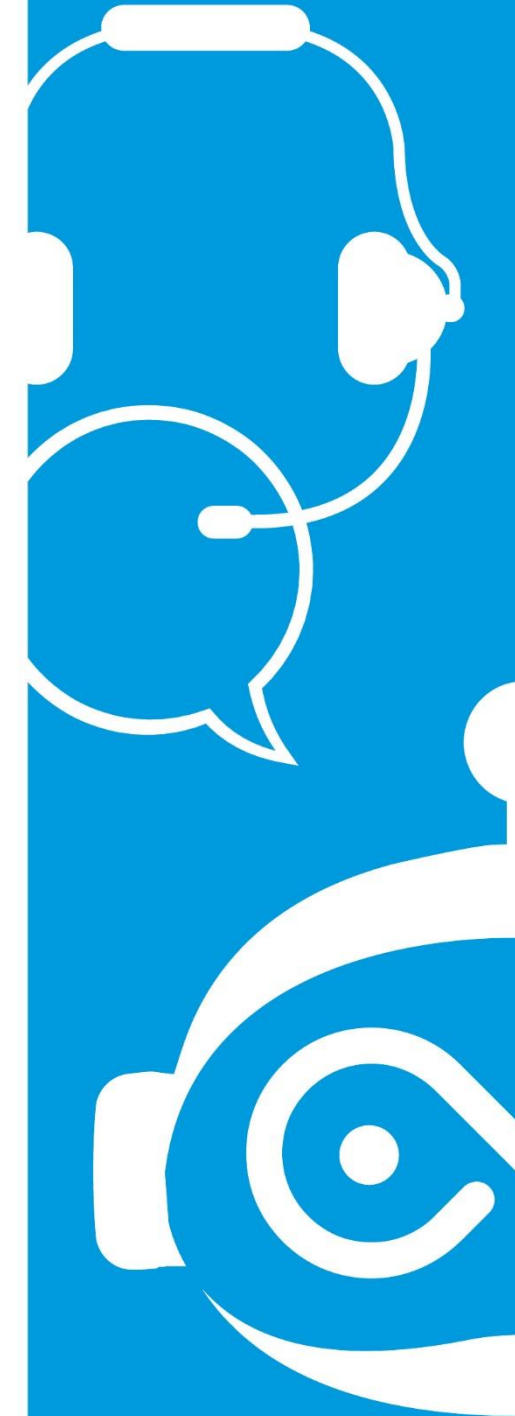
What are some ways in which youth can be supported?

- Teach youth to recognise red flags indicative of someone using a fake identity to conceal their own, such as avoiding video calls, inconsistent stories, or refusal to meet in person. Encourage open discussions about their online interactions and experiences, and provide real-life examples to illustrate the warning signs.

- Foster a healthy sense of scepticism in youth when they engage with individuals online. Encourage them to question the authenticity of relationships, especially if the connection seems too good to be true. Share stories and case studies to illustrate the potential risks, emphasizing the importance of critical thinking and digital literacy.

- Recognise the emotional impact of catfishing and provide resources for coping with distress. As a professional, you can guide youth towards seeking counselling, therapy, or support groups if they have experienced emotional harm. Ensure they are aware of the availability of mental health services and provide information on how to access them.

- Inform youth about reporting mechanisms, as many social media platforms frequently used by youth for chatting, such as Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat, and Facebook, offer user-friendly reporting and blocking features. These mechanisms enable users to take control of their online experiences and protect themselves from potential catfishing incidents or cyberbullying. Reporting suspicious accounts can lead to their investigation or removal from the platform, while blocking ensures that the user can no longer interact with or contact the offending party.
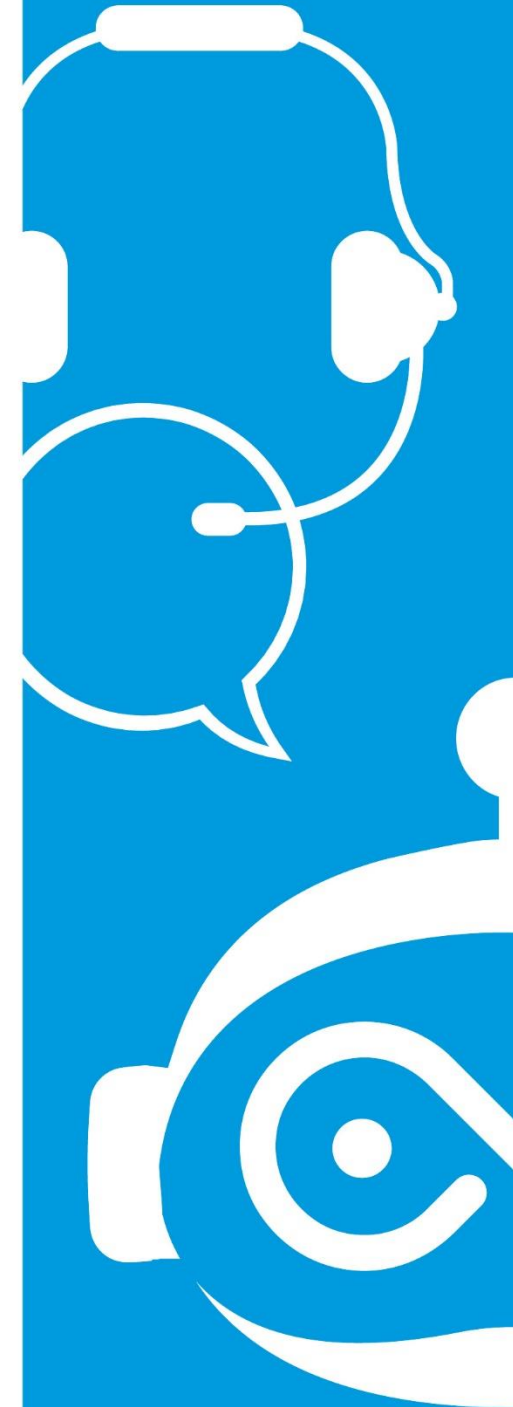
Related digital phenomena/tools:

See sheets:

- Cyberbullying - Trolls and bots
- Cyberbullying: Cyber stalking
- Cyberbullying: Doxxing

Further reading:

- Copp, Jennifer & Mumford, Elizabeth & Taylor, Bruce. (2021). Online sexual harassment and cyberbullying in a nationally representative sample of teens: Prevalence, predictors, and consequences. Journal of Adolescence. 93. 202-211.
- Kristy, Amelya & Krisdinanto, Nanang & Akhsaniyah, Akhsaniyah. (2023). Two Face Personality in Identity Falsification and Catfishing Behavior on Online Dating Tinder. Communicatus: Jurnal Ilmu komunikasi. 7. 1-20.
- Lauckner, Carolyn & Truszczynski, Natalia & Lambert, Danielle & Kottamasu, Varsha & Meherally, Saher & Schipani-McLaughlin, Anne Marie & Taylor, Erica & Hansen, Nathan. (2019). "Catfishing," cyberbullying, and coercion: An exploration of the risks associated with dating app use among rural sexual minority males. Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health. 23. 1-18.
- Simmons, Mariah & Lee, Joon-Suk. (2020). Catfishing: A Look into Online Dating and Impersonation.
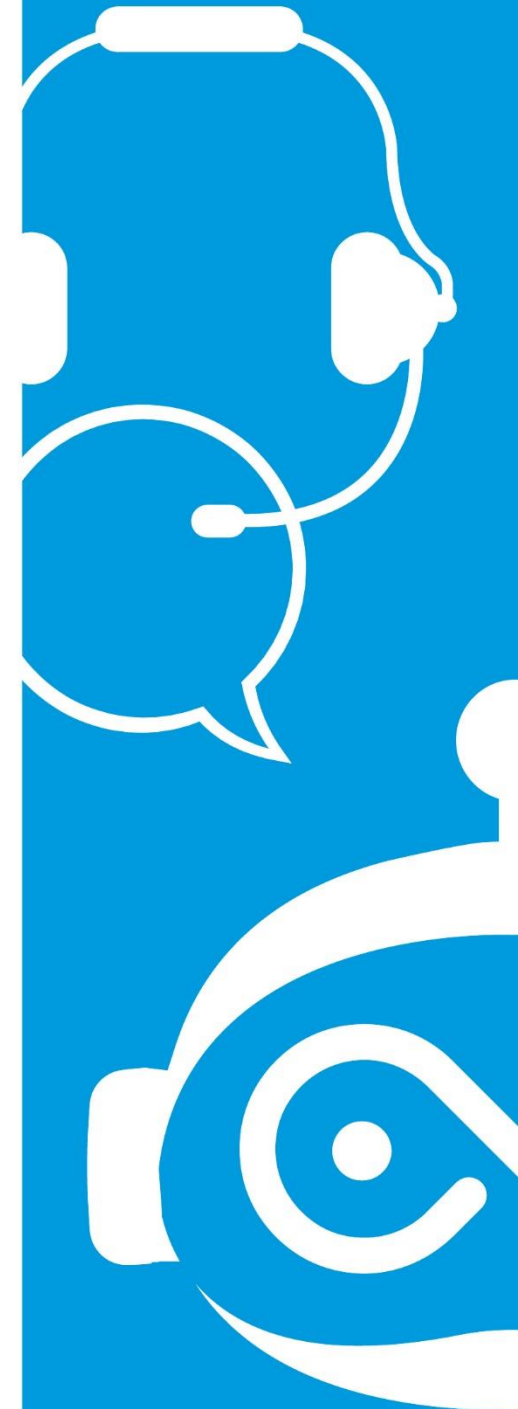
- Zorlu, Eyup. (2022). An Examination of the Relationship between College Students' Cyberbullying Awareness and Ability to Ensure their Personal Cybersecurity. Journal of Learning and Teaching in Digital Age. 8.