



To Catfish or Not to Catfish? The Ethics of Online Deception

Thanks to director, producer, and writer Nev Schulman, most of us know the dangers of “catfishing” because his popular MTV television show, *Catfish*, highlights how quickly online deception can go wrong. “Catfishing” has gained enough traction in popular usage to warrant its addition to our lexicon. One newly-added definition of “catfishing” is “to deceive (someone) by creating a false personal profile online” (Merriam-Webster, 2018).

Why would anyone engage in such digital deception? The person doing the catfishing—the catfish, in other words—may lie for a number of reasons, but in most cases this deception comes from a desire to create and sustain a relationship (usually romantic) with someone they believe would reject them were they to act in a fully transparent manner. A catfish often feels motivated by and overwhelmed with feelings of uncertainty, loneliness and dejection. By creating a persona that is far from their own, they feel more confident to connect with others online; some even develop lasting relationships with their



[Dan Hankins / CC BY 2.0](#)

“catfishee.” Online identities are easily fabricated because there is no fact-checker peering over our shoulders to make sure we present ourselves as accurately as possible. Sharon Coen of the University of Salford says that catfishing “offers an opportunity for people to try on different identities, and interact with others on the basis of that identity.” She emphasizes that younger people often experience this need for experimentation with their identities, including catfishing “to express parts of one’s identity which are not acceptable according to social norms.” This could include a fear of publicizing their sexuality, race, physical appearance, health issues, or other such factors open to social pressures. For these reasons, many people like Nev Schulman empathize with the acts of the catfisher. Beyond this, he even claims that there is some benefit to the catfishee—they are flattered and take part in a meaningful relationship that, while not real in some respects, is a rewarding fantasy in other ways. In his book, Schulman says that “addicted, emotionally dependent, and in too deep, the catfished hopefuls end up turning a blind eye... the catfish makes them feel special... they make them feel *loved*” (Schulman, 2014).

Many still believe the ethical problem with catfishing is clear. It’s a deceptive presentation of self in relationships that are supposed to be very close and trusting. Even though many catfishers do not intend to act maliciously with their lies, some utilize this deception to gain monetary favors and gifts from the deceived catfishee. Furthermore, the catfishee is robbed of time and effort they have invested in a relationship with someone who isn’t who they said they were. As shown on *Catfish*, the catfisees express a number of emotions when they discover the true identity of their online relational partner: some display feelings of anger



and betrayal, others feel worthless for not being told the truth, and some feel more insecurity as a result of this deception. The deception hurts, but the illusion could be comforting if it's maintained. Things that could be verified or falsified with a quick Google search are ignored. "Finding out that the thing that makes you happy and distracts you from all your problems isn't real is not what people want" Schulman says, "so they choose not to" (Horn, 2014).

Catfishing is only becoming easier—and more worrisome—with the increasing popularity of social media and online dating apps like Tinder and Bumble. Some may even consider sprinkling white lies across your dating profile a form of catfishing. This further complicates the line on what constitutes catfishing and what is just image management in a complex online environment. How much truth should there be in our relationships and identities in the digital realm?

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the ethical problem with catfishing? What values are in conflict in this case study?
2. Does it matter if the catfish does not hope for an "offline" relationship, or if the relationship was composed of only online interactions?
3. Assuming that the act of catfishing was not connected to a plan of defrauding the catfished of money or goods, is the act of catfishing morally worrisome? Why or why not?
4. How much of your real identity do you owe to people online? What principles should guide us in our interactions with others who may not fully know who we are?
5. Why is transparency of identity ethically good in online interactions? Can you see times when hiding one's identity online—or changing it—is an ethically good thing?

Further Information:

Coen, Sharon. "Not all online catfish are bad, but strong communities can net the ones that are." *The Conversation*, September 28, 2015. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/not-all-online-catfish-are-bad-but-strong-communities-can-net-the-ones-that-are-47981>

Horn, Leslie. "The Psychology of Catfishing, From Its First Public Victim." *Gizmodo*, September 2, 2014. Available at: <https://gizmodo.com/the-psychology-of-catfishing-from-its-most-public-vict-1629558216>

Martin, Denise. "Here's How MTV's *Catfish* Actually Works." *Vulture*, May 21, 2014. Available at: <http://www.vulture.com/2014/05/catfish-mtv-casting-production-process.html>



Ossad, Jordana. "Catfish' Detective Nev Schulman's Top Digital Dating Tips: Less Emojis, More Face Time." *MTV*, June 26, 2014. Available at:

<http://www.mtv.com/news/1855372/nev-schulman-catfish-dating-tips/>

Puppyteeth, Jaik. "Is it OK to Be a Casual Catfish?" *Vice*, February 5, 2017. Available

at: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qkzz45/is-it-ok-to-be-a-casual-catfish

Schulman, Nev. *In Real Life: Love, Lies & Identity in the Digital Age*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014.

Authors:

Alex Purcell & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.

Media Ethics Initiative

Center for Media Engagement

University of Texas at Austin

November 5, 2018

www.mediaethicsinitiative.org