



The Different Species of the Online Catfish: *The Circle* and the Ethics of Online Identity



Promotional Poster / [Wikipedia](#) / Modified

Netflix's new show, *The Circle*, is a real-life popularity contest where the winner claims the title of "the circle champion" and a whopping sum of \$100,000. There's a catch, however, which makes the show a bit fishy. Players interact with each other only through a voice-activated text messaging program designed by Netflix in a controlled and isolated environment without any other social media or internet access. Each player can choose to be themselves, another version of themselves, or someone completely different through their typed conversations. Everyone gets to choose their name and the profile pictures they present to the other contestants. The least popular players can be

blocked by the circle "influencers," the two most popular players from the previous round of competition. In this highly-controlled competition for popularity, "catfishing" is not only allowed, but it might bring considerable advantage.

"Catfishing" has become a popular internet phenomenon where social media and online dating site users trick others by pretending to be someone they are not (D'Costa 2014). Catfishes "hook" people into online friendships and romances, creating a story about themselves that is often far from the truth. The online medium allows for the easy manipulation of one's image; an estimated 83 million Facebook accounts are fake (Gordon 2019). A catfish not only deceives people into believing they are someone else, but they also can bring considerable harm to others. It is a perfect way for pedophiles and other internet criminals to target innocent social media users, or a method for scammers to gain ill-gotten riches through impersonation. Once a catfish lures other users to share intimate information, they might extort the fooled person with threats to release this sensitive content. Cyberbullies sometimes mask their intentions and embarrass their target with information collected from the targeted individual out of misplaced trust. In less harmful cases, individuals still feel deceived when they find out an online partner or friend was not who they said they were. Catfishing for many seems like the worst sort of deception, one that involves inauthentically hiding or changing who you really are as a person.

But what *The Circle* teaches us is that catfishing is not as clear cut in what it means and what makes it morally questionable. For instance, what if one catfishes not out of malice, but instead from the desire to spread a message that they are more than their appearance (De Maria 2020)? One female competitor, Sean, chose to use pictures of a thinner friend "Colleen" for her profile. Sean claimed she chose to catfish so that people could fall in love with her quirky and bubbly personality, and not sneer at her "plus sized body." In this instance, Sean only changed her appearance and not her complete self in her mediated interactions with others on the show. It's true that people tend to "judge a book by its cover," and using photos that are visually appealing



can translate into a popularity advantage, or at least get one's personality a hearing before someone moves on in the rapidly changing world of online interactions. Another *Circle* competitor, Karyn, used photos of another woman and the name "Mercedeze" to create a heterosexual personality that she predicted would gain her popularity on the show (Sanchez 2020). In another instance, the male *Circle* competitor Seaburn chose to completely transform himself into the character of "Rebecca," a sweet, innocent female persona, because he thought it would give him an advantage in gaming the other male contestants. In a culminating real-life encounter over dinner before the season finale, "Rebecca"/Seaburn revealed his true self to four remaining competitors, most of whom were initially shocked about the radical deception that Seaburn had built up over many interactions. Each of these examples from *The Circle* allow us to imagine various ways that identity can be manipulated for different purposes and projects of the catfishing agent, each of which reveals different sorts of deception and inauthenticity by the communicating agent.

But *The Circle* has one more thought-provoking twist up its virtual sleeve. Male *Circle* contestant Ed chose to use his real name and a real profile picture for the game, but conducted his catfishing in his Netflix-controlled apartment with his secret weapon: his mom. This case of catfishing is different: even though the picture and name were accurate, the "brains" and personality behind the virtual self was really a composite of two individuals. Ed's purpose in bringing his mother into his catfishing was to help him be the *best* version of himself. Ed's mom worked on his word choice and strategy with each contestant to gain trust and popularity in *The Circle*. Ed, and his mother, built a relationship with *Circle* contestant Sammy, whom he chose to visit in real life after he was eliminated from the game. Upon revealing that he was accompanied by his mother, Sammy was shocked. Ed's mother explained that the dynamic duo used "Ed's looks" and her brain to flirt and build relationships with the other contestants. Ed's catfishing was an act of deception toward the other contestants of *The Circle*, since he was not writing all of the messages and social media content like some of the other players. But other cases of catfishing involve a person being inauthentic in a different way—telling stories about themselves that do not match up to who they *really* are. But the question arises—who is Ed "really?" Ed didn't use fake photographs or spread false information about himself, he just employed his mom as a check on his less-desirable ways of interacting with females; in other words, she was used to "enhance" his presentation of self. If one's "authentic" identity might be the *best* part or version of one's complex real-life self, could a composite catfish like Ed/Ed's Mother bring out the highest potentials in Ed to his conversational partners?

Despite its drama and plot twists, *The Circle* shows us the range of ways that one can alter online identities in efforts at catfishing others. Some of these are clearly morally reprehensible, but some are not. And the reasons why we find some problematic seem to jar with what is troublesome about other cases of catfishing. If real-life identity is as complex as a human's ever-changing life story, and if there are so many different species of the online catfish, might we be fooling ourselves into thinking we understand the complex morality of identity in digital communication?



Discussion Questions:

1. What different types of online catfishing might you identify? What differentiates them from each other?
2. What makes catfishing—in general, or in some of its specific forms—morally problematic?
3. What values underlie individual negative responses to finding out that someone is a catfish? Are these reactions warranted?
4. What does it mean to present your *real* or *authentic* self to others in online interaction? Would you put this same burden on other interactions such as job interviews, with their high emphasis on strategic presentation of personal details?
5. What are the ethical implications of someone using deception like Ed did—perhaps to bring out his *best* self in every interaction? If Ed wasn't doing this as part of a competition, would your judgment of this sort of catfishing change?

Further Information:

D'Costa, K. (2014, April 25). Catfishing: The Truth about Deception Online. Retrieved from <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/catfishing-the-truth-about-deception-online/>

De Maria, M. (2020, January 16). 'The Circle' Is More Than a Netflix Reality Show-It's Challenging Fatphobia. Retrieved from <https://www.glamour.com/story/the-circle-netflix-reality-show-sean>

Gordon, S. (2019, December 2). Learn the Warning Signs of Catfishing to Prevent Being Cyberbullied. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellfamily.com/what-is-catfishing-460588>

Sanchez, O. (2020, January). Get to know the real people in 'The Circle' catfish photos. Retrieved from <https://ew.com/tv/netflix-the-circle-real-people-used-in-catfish-photos/>

Authors:

Michaela Urban & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.
Media Ethics Initiative
Center for Media Engagement
University of Texas at Austin
March 24, 2020