Ethics of Online Catfishing

Catfishing is the process of creating a fake persona or misrepresenting oneself on the Internet.

Catfish, the documentary TV series on MTV, stars two men who travel around the U.S. investigating people who they believe have been depicting themselves falsely to another user online. Since these interactions are purely digital, it is quite easy to use inaccurate photos or post misinformation of yourself in order to mislead online users. Catfisher motivations could include personal insecurity, mental illness, revenge, harassment, or exploring sexual preferences. Online dating in particular has been closely linked to the act of catfishing. In fact, in an article by Krystal D'Costa on the *Scientific American* website, she states that 54% of online daters believe that someone else has presented false information in their dating profile. As of now, some social media platforms have regulations that could better protect their users from online deception, for example, an age restriction, but catfishing continues to occur through numerous loopholes.

I. Starting Questions
1) Do we all give off a fake self to some degree online or otherwise? Why or why not? Where do we draw the line ethically between a real profile picture vs. a fake one? Is it the filter? Quality? Structure?

2) In what ways can a person lie about themselves online?

3) Can lying online cross an ethical line? Why or why not? If so, where is that line?

4) Should social media platforms actively monitor user accounts for suspicious activity? If yes, then how would they know what suspicious activity looked like, especially if there are no statements of actual malice — when someone chooses to lie, on purpose, to hurt another — by the user? If no, then why?

II. Mini Prompts
1) <u>Catfishing to Cyberbullying</u>
"People have been falsifying information for eons, but since the beginning of the internet it has become more prevalent. Now people can easily create a fake profile (sometimes numerous accounts) and use the information shared to hurt another person. We have seen again and again how teens are using the internet as a tool to hurt one another on social media sites. Catfishing is another form of bullying. If a person uses technology to cause repeated harm to another — then plain and simple, it's bullying" - (PsychologyToday.com, 2013)

Question: If catfishing has developed into a type of cyberbullying, then what restrictions or consequences should be put in place by the platform owner to combat it?

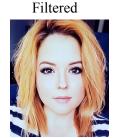# Ethics of Online Catfishing

2) <u>Catfishing in Fear of Being Judged</u>

"I wasn't out of the closet, but I was curious," 35-year-old Jacob tells NewNowNext. "Kimberly was my alias. She was popular on Tumblr at the time and posted casual and racy photos. I had an entire folder dedicated to her; there was no conceivable circumstance that I didn't have an image for. Looking back, it was definitely creepy, but I felt there was no better option to explore my sexuality at the time. I wasn't ready to come out [nor] had the knowledge to know I had to."

Question: How does using catfish methods to explore one's sexuality differ from using catfish methods to trick or mislead others on the internet? How might this harm the catfisher in coming to terms with their sexuality? How might this help the catfisher?

III. More Questions
[Please reference the images below]

1) If catfishing most properly means stealing someone else's likeness to use as your own, then how does using filters when posting selfies compare to catfishing? How would using a photo of an object or a group photo as your profile picture be wrong or misleading to the public, if at all? How might this be decided in a court of law or by a platform provider? How does your intention to mislead others, perhaps because you are simply shy, or because you like that image - affect the ethics of doing so, if at all?

Filtered	Non-Filtered

This is the same woman, as seen on the TV show Before the 90 Days (image source). *She sends the filtered pictures to a man she met online who lives in Tunisia. They have never met in person.*

2) If a catfisher uses the likeness of another individual without permission to create their facade, should this be against the law? Why or why not? Imagine a catfisher accuses the original user of catfishing. To resolve the dispute, how far should platforms be able to investigate the users' backgrounds? How far should they sacrifice privacy and accessibility for the sake of moderation and justice?