



Catfishing Phenomenon in the Perspective of Online Dating Services Users

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Abstract. The presence of online dating in the current digital era makes it easy for users to find their desired potential partner. The problem arises when not all online dating services require users to verify identity. Some users easily fake their identities to make them appear more attractive, known as catfishing behavior. On the one hand, constructing an identity for a specific purpose is common in online dating services. But on the other hand, it can trigger a psychological impact for potential partners whose expectations are not met, and can even open a loophole for crime. This study wants to see the perception of online dating service users towards the catfishing phenomenon. Using the phenomenological method, this descriptive qualitative research was conducted with in-depth interviews with four informants who use online dating services with varying intensity of use and level of experience. As a result, the informants perceive a natural tendency to construct attractive impressions in online dating services. However, identity discrepancies in online dating services are at some point an unacceptable form of dishonesty. The informants also have their own anticipatory steps to avoid the snares of catfishing, from inviting video calls to doing their own profiling on social media.

Keywords: Catfish, Identity, New Media, Online Dating.

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INTRODUCTION

The intensity of online dating services usage has increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The CEO of Tinder, Elie Seidman, stated that there was an average increase in the volume of conversations on the platform by 20 percent worldwide, meanwhile the duration of the conversations increased by 25 percent. In Indonesia, the conversation volume increased by 23 percent with the average of conversation duration increasing by 19 percent (Lawi, 2020). There are numerous reasons why online dating service users tend to be more active during this period, including boredom that arises due to various restrictions on mobility and interaction during the pandemic (Salsabila & Widiasavitri, 2021).

As what happened in other online social networks, the classical problem that often arises on online dating services is the use of fake identities or popularly known as catfishing Wani (2017). estimates that 1 out of 10 identities on online dating services is fake. For comparison, Scamwatch data in 2012 noted that 83 million Facebook accounts were fake, and 1 out of 10 Twitter accounts were fake (Adam, 2017). Some of them are innocent, but others have dishonest intentions and can lead to fraud. In online dating the purpose of faking identity is especially for attracting more people to have matched. When someone is already interested, the identity forger can take advantage by asking for personal information. Furthermore, the unwanted things that might happen include swindle or playing with emotions (Wani et al., 2017).

The impact of fake identity usage on online dating services can be very diverse and not always as financial losses. Some victims also experienced exploitation and indicated mental health disorders, ranging from anxiety, stress, and depression. The sophistication of technology that continues to advance allows the extent of catfish to be broader, meanwhile, the cases are often not reported by victims for various reasons including shame and fear of being discussed on social media (Sonhaji & Supriyono, 2022). A survey of 512 Tinder users in 2017 revealed that 21.53 percent of respondents had a negative experience when using the service. Some of them are meeting someone who is categorized as a 'freak' as many as 38.55 percent, being teased unpleasantly as many as 23.29 percent, experiencing misinterpretation as many as 9.37 percent, meeting someone known in real life as many as 15.85 percent, and sexually harassed as many as 12.52 percent (Fandia, 2017).

It is not without reason that online dating is still in demand even though it has several security-related risks. This service allows people who did not know each other before to meet and introduce themselves on the internet, to build personal, romantic, and even sexual relationships. The process is relatively easy, just register and create a profile that contains some information such as age, gender, location, etc. Online dating plays an important role in nowadays matchmaking, so there are numerous variants with different characteristics (Wani et al., 2017).

However, everyone has not the same goal when joining an online dating service. Some only searching for fun and making friends, but some are looking for a more serious relationship. A survey of 512 Tinder users in Indonesia in 2017 revealed that 36.99 percent of respondents used the service out of curiosity, and 74.14 percent wanted to make friends from the platform. As many as 50.29 percent of respondents continued to chat with their matches or partners through more personal platforms, including WhatsApp with 58.90 percent, LINE with 58.51

percent, and BBM (Blackberry Messenger) with 49.90 percent. As a follow-up to match on Tinder, as many as 32.8 percent of respondents admitted to physically meet with their matches they found online. Meanwhile, only 19.37 percent of respondents continued their relationship to a more serious level (Fandia, 2017).

Among the various online dating services that are popular in Indonesia, Tinder is one of the most popular. Out Of 1,613 respondents in the Rakuten Insight report in October 2020, 57.59 percent were Tinder users. Tantan is next in line, followed by OK Cupid. The Dailysocial.id survey in 2017 also placed Tinder as the most online dating platform used by respondents in Indonesia at 22.47 percent, followed by OK Cupid at 10.11 percent, and Setipe at 9.91 percent (Dailysocial.ID, 2017).

The practice of online dating that has been assimilated in the culture of digital society worsen the catfish dilemma as a form of identity fraud that arises due to the absence of regulation and education. Internet-mediated meetings allow users of online dating services to present themselves by showing ideal characteristics that are considered good, although inaccurate, the goal is only to get a partner. Regulations made by the government through Information and Electronic Transaction Law (UU-ITE) are not sufficient to bind or prevent the practice of catfishing in online dating services (Dewi & Irwansyah, 2021).

The term of catfish has various definitions, one of which refers to someone who uses an online dating site to commit fraud. The goal is financial gain by establishing relationships first with people on the site (Wani et al., 2017). Another definition states catfish as a term to describe identity fraud by someone who has never been known or met before, usually occurring in cyberspace and through social media (Adam, 2017). The motive behind catfish can also vary, not always for financial gain. Some Tinder users use profile photos with better looks just to make it easier to find the match they want (Nurdin, 2021). The catfishing phenomenon is possible because everyone on the internet is free to be anyone, free to construct identity in any ways for certain purposes (Dewi & Irwansyah, 2021).

There are several relevant theories to explain identity management in online dating, including the Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory initiated by Sandra Petronio, and the Social Information Processing (SIP) theory developed by Joseph Walther. In social penetration theory, Altman and Taylor discuss self-disclosure and picturing someone as an onion skin with a layered personality structure. Petronio in Communication Privacy Management more specific talks about the disclosure of private information. This theory has three main parts, namely: (1) Ownership of privacy, including privacy boundaries that others remain unknown; (2) Privacy controls, including decisions to share personal information with others; (3) Privacy turbulence, when the management of personal information does not work as expected. According to this theory, a person believes that they hold the ownership of personal information and has the right to control it. When the information is exposed to another person then that person will be involved in joint ownership with the rules attached (Griffin et al., 2019).

This theory states that individuals who are involved in a relationship are constantly managing the boundaries between public and private. The need to share information and the need to protect oneself is constantly present in every relationship and requires one to always negotiate and coordinate each other's boundaries. Everyone has an instinct about information ownership about themselves and always feels they have the right to control the situation. A person

is also constantly making decisions about what to disclose, to whom to disclose the information, and when and how to disclose it. This decision-making process is a dialectic between the pressure to reveal and cover-up (Littlejohn et al., 2017).

Before Walther introduced the theory of Social Information Processing, limited non-verbal cues were considered inferring the process of obtaining information and building impressions. Walther admits that online communication with limited non-verbal cues resulting in cold and impersonal communication because of this matter. However, the same thing can happen to face-to-face communication. Therefore, Walther introduced the theory of Social Information Processing with two accompanying features: (1) verbal cues can effectively compensate for the absence of non-verbal cues in online communication when information exchange occurs; (2) online communication takes longer to result the same impression and closeness as in face-to-face communication (Griffin et al., 2019).

This theory introduces the concept of hyper personality, which is a condition where online relationships become more intimate than when they meet physically. One of the elements of hyper personality is selective self-presentation, which means people who meet online could make excessive and prolonged positive impressions. In an online relationship, a person can display the most attractive traits and achievements, without being burdened by contradicting physical appearances. People who meet online also find it easier to avoid people who know their dark sides. This study aims to explain the catfish phenomenon from the perspective of various types of online dating service users and how anticipatory efforts are made to avoid the trap of doers and the negative impacts they cause.

RESEARCH METHOD

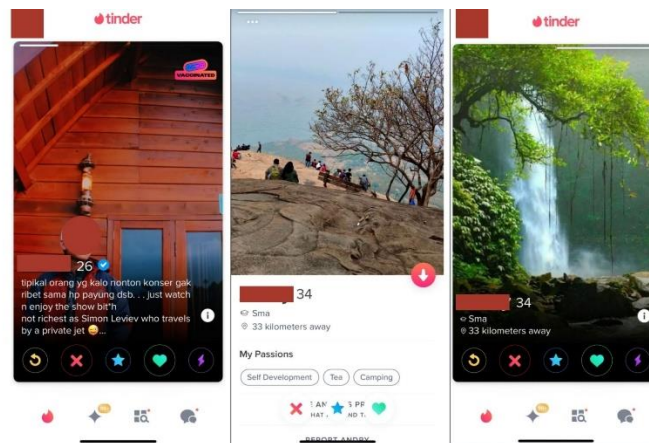
This study used a phenomenological method with a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were obtained through observation and in-depth interviews. Observations were made on several online dating platforms, including user identity management on each platform. Meanwhile, interviews were conducted with four informants of online dating services users who represent different levels of experience and types of platforms. Informant 1 and informant 2 have been using online dating services for less than a year, each using the Tinder platform and the web-based online dating platform www.kontakjodohkatolik.com. Informant 3 and Informant 4 have been using online dating services for more than five years with experience exploring more than one platform. While active on online dating services, informants 1, 2, and 3 lived in Indonesia, while informant 4 was moving between Indonesia and several countries in Europe. This study focuses on the perception of online dating service users towards catfishing behavior and how to identify and anticipate its existence.

RESULT

Various perceptions about catfish were obtained based on the interview results with the four informants, along with the potential impacts and how to overcome them. How the informants define the authenticity of identity and how they make anticipatory efforts are explained in the following description. The four informants were aware of the risks of meeting catfish or someone using a fake identity when using online dating services. Informant 1 and informant 2 had never

heard of the catfish term before, but from the beginning, they both considered the issue of fake identities in online dating services as a risk that needed to be anticipated. The four informants also agreed that it is normal giving an edited profile picture to make it look more attractive, as long as the photo used is not someone else's photo. Informant 2, who has the intention to meet a serious soulmate, believes that everyone basically wants to show their best in online dating services. Therefore, editing photos or adding certain filters to make them look more attractive is still acceptable as long as the face can still be recognized. However, informant 1 and informant 2 agreed to avoid or not choose online dating users who do not put their photos or unrecognizable photos, such as pictures of cartoon characters or landscapes.

At least there is a photo. If there is no photo (not even one), I will question why he didn't put any photos. Why didn't he dare to reveal himself? What's wrong? Is he unconfident? Or why? Meanwhile, I think I provide the correct data, even though it is not detailed. (Informant 1, 2022)



Source: Screenshot Tinder application, 2022

Figure 1

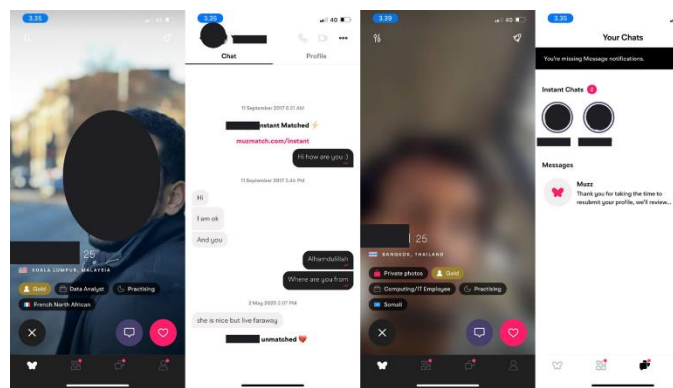
The user interface of verified and unverified Tinder profiles. The left image shows verified profile, while the center and right image show unverified profile.

Regarding the authenticity of the biodata provided on the online dating service, the four informants have different views. Informant 1 avoids users who tend to provide minimum biodata or provide 'unreasonable' or too good to be true biodata. The same opinion was also stated by informant 2. The rest informants prefer to have a good prejudice regarding the biodata authenticity. However, if in further interactions is found that there is inappropriate biodata, all four informants consider it as a form of dishonesty that cannot be tolerated.

If their profiles are complete and make sense, not being weird, I still believe in myself that it's the correct data. Anyway, I just believe in God because we have good intentions to look for a life partner. If our intention is good, I hope God will give me people with good intentions as well. (Informant 1, 2022)

Informant 3 assessed various possibilities when someone fake their identity in online dating services. Although it is feasible, the informant 3 considers that identity fraud is not always accompanied by criminal intentions. Apart from not being confident, informant 3 believes that the fear of not being accepted can also be a reason for someone to fake their real identity. This generally happened when their real identity violates a norm, for example different conditions or sexual orientation. There is also another possibility, it is from the ego to maintain a relationship where they believe if their real identity revealed, their match would leave them. Out of all the possibilities, informant 3 believes that faking one's real identity can result a psychological impact on the match when the expectations are not met in the end. Even if there was something they hide in the beginning, according to informant 3, it is better to reveal it when they have decided to interact with each other.

Unless they admitted from the beginning. After being matched they would say like, 'by the way, the ones in the profile I filled it out for fun, you know, not all of them are right'. That's different case. But if they physically meet and turned out the person is different, totally different, well that also includes catfishing. Invisible catfishing breeds. (Informant 3, 2022)



Source: Screenshot Muzmatch applications, 2017

Figure 2

The old user interface of Muzmatch, now called Muzz, is an online dating service with Islamic nuances.

Still related to the possibility of catfishing perpetrators falsifying identities in online dating services, informant 3 also mentioned the existence of ego to maintain a relationship where they believe if their real identity revealed, their match would leave them. In the theory of Social Information Processing (SIP), Joseph Walther uses the term hyper personal to describe relationships that tend to be more intimate when established online, rather than the face-to-face one. One of the elements found in this situation is selective self-presentation, it is the tendency to maintain excessive and perpetual positive impressions as described by informant 3 (Griffin et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, personal experience of using a fake identity at the beginning of using online dating services in 2015 formed a different view on informant 4. According to informant 4, there is always an 'element of distrust' when someone does not use a real identity. As long as there is still something hidden, informant 4

believes that someone will not find what they hope for. Informant 4 initially also used a fake identity to maintain its reputation, because at that time online dating services were still often associated with negative things. When later tried to use a real identity on other online dating platforms, informant 4 felt a different experience such as it was easier to feel connected with the match. However, informant 4 thought that not all detailed information about real identity should be disclosed. Informant 4 chose to keep only 'displaying a little' aka not excessively. Certain things are better revealed by themselves when they have interacted with each other. Likewise, informant 1, also sorted out what information needs to be revealed at the beginning and what information should be kept until they really found a convincing match.

It's not detailed because the questions are indeed various up to about work, and income, so those are what I skipped. But for general data about what is our job, whether we are employees or something, it's better to share at the beginning. (Informant 2, 2022)



Source: Screenshot Tinder application, 2022

Figure 3
Verified profile view on Bumble

Even though trying to have a good prejudice against the identity of other people in online dating services, informant 1 still has a verification effort toward the matches she got. One of them is by inviting the match to a video call before deciding to go further. One of the matches that informant 1 finally chose as a life partner, has succeeded in convincing informant 1 by bringing his family with him during a video call. For informant 1, this indicates that nothing is hidden.

Informant 3 also recommends a similar step, and if someone repeatedly avoids being invited to a video call, it is necessary to suspect that there is something wrong with that person. However, before inviting to a video call, informant 3 suggested interacting via chat first. If necessary, the interaction can be continued

first to another platform that does not use a personal contact number such as Telegram. According to informant 3, it could lower the risk of being stalked if unexpected things happen in the future.

Another method was done by informant 2 who chose to trace the identity of someone he met on an online dating service. Equipped with the available pieces of information, informant 2 traced and compared the identity of the person on various social media platforms. Informant 2 will only feel assured if the information is consistent and convincing. While emphasizes on increasing interactions and conversations to reveal a person's real identity, informant 4 also used the same method which is profiling on the internet for the matches they met. "We must know that this person is real (the identity). Sometimes when I was talking, I asked where they are working, their last name, and then I google it," said informant 4.

Another effort to reduce the risk of being caught in a catfish trap is to limit excessive expectations in online dating services. Informant 4 said that excessive expectations arise in one's mind when the information obtained is relatively limited. According to Informant 4, this might happen due to the lack of interaction and maintaining a 'healthy relationship' both in online dating and in the real life. Meanwhile, informant 3 said that online dating service users should recognize various types of relationships and identify what type of relationship they want. Some online dating users may expect a serious relationship, but others are only looking for friendship or casual relationships. According to Informant 4, being shocked by encountering many forms of relationships that previously were unimaginable can make a person vulnerable to being caught in a catfish's trap.

We should know our needs. It gets back to the goal. If you're just looking for friends, off you go, but if you're looking for a match who must get married in the next 1-2 years, good luck... because it won't always work out. (Informant 3, 2022)

A special note was conveyed by informant 3 stating that "online dating is not for everyone". According to informant 3, in terms of matchmaking, it must be realized that everyone has their own 'pool'. Some people succeeded to find a soul mate on online dating services, but it doesn't mean everyone can find one in the same place. According to informant 3, online dating is only one of many mediums to meet a partner. If someone feels that they always fail to establish relationships in online dating services, then they need to evaluate so that they don't rely too much on one medium.

DISCUSSION

Regarding the authenticity of profile photos, several online dating platforms such as Tinder and Bumble provide a verification feature and provide a blue tick sign for verified photos. Tinder introduced the verification feature in 2019 for users in Japan and started expanding to global users in 2021 (Tinder, 2021). Informant 2 did not know this feature because it was not yet available at the time she is still actively using it. Informant 2 has no longer been active using Tinder since finding a life partner in 2014. Meanwhile, the web-based online dating service used by Informant 1, namely www.kontakjodohkatolik.com does not have this feature. However, both informant 1 and informant 2 agreed that the addition of a

verification feature in online dating services is a positive move that will possibly help minimize the risk of catfishing.

Meanwhile, informant 3 and informant 4 stated that adding the profile photo verification feature will not completely eradicate the risk of catfishing. Based on experience, informant 3 still found a Tinder profile with verified photos but the biodata only includes initials, not a clear name. There are also profiles with verified photos but still include incorrect information about their biographies, such as height and even religion. Meanwhile, informant 4 reminded us that catfishing is not solely a risk in online dating that needs to be beware. In some of the cases the informant 4 observed, abuse or violence by partners from online dating might happen even though the identity of the photo or biodata listed was actual or even verified. Informant 3 warned that verified status is possibly providing an opportunity for fraud because it makes the perpetrators appear more convincing. Rory Kozoll, Tinder's Head of Trust and Product Safety, when launching the verification feature for the global market, acknowledged that the identity verification process is complex. However, he believes that providing a sense of security through the verification feature can make users more confident about the authenticity of their matches and can give users more control in determining whom they will interact with (Tinder, 2021).

The risk of meeting and dealing with catfish in online dating services can be lowered in several ways. As for Informant 1 and informant 2, they chose an online dating platform that they believe is safe. Informant 1 chose the platform with a religious background, namely www.kontakjodohkatolik.com which is believed to be more exclusive and segmented, and hoped the risk of meeting users with bad intentions is reduced. Informant 2 chose Tinder as recommended by a friend which was considered to have a more positive image than other online dating platforms. Around 2015, online dating was generally associated with an unhealthy society.

As a dating enthusiast who has experience exploring various online dating platforms, informant 3 identified that platforms with a simple registration process tend to be more vulnerable to being infiltrated by catfish. One of them is Tinder, which informant 3 called 'boiled peanuts' because of its popularity, downloaded by so many people. Other platforms, such as Coffee Meets Bagel, are considered more segmented so they are relatively safer. Likewise, the OKCupid platform has about 1,000 questions for users to fill out, making it more of a hassle for catfish if only seek some fun. Some platforms require extra patience, by limiting the recommended matches in a day, such as www.Setipe.com. Informant 3 considered that these various characteristics can reduce the tendency of catfishing even though it cannot be 100 percent safe. Likewise, online dating platforms with religious nuances, according to informant 3, are still not guaranteed to be free from the risk of fraud. In one of the cases Informant 3 had encountered, a religious-based online dating service user met a match who, after being investigated, turned out to be involved in a baby trafficking crime.

When interacting online, a person's decision to choose which personal information to share is part of the privacy controls described in the theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM). According to this theory, a person has privacy boundaries that limit the ownership of information between their selves and others. The boundaries vary from those that are so thin and porous that they can be penetrated to those that are so thick that they can cover the deep and dark sides of a person (Griffin et al., 2019).

As explained in Social Information Processing theory, one of the limitations of online communication is the fewer verbal cues than face-to-face, especially the text-based platform. Therefore, Walther admitted that online communication can be cold and impersonal. But face-to-face communication is sometimes the same. Online communication sometimes just takes more time and effort to result in the same impression and closeness as direct or face-to-face communication (Griffin et al., 2019).

Specifically talking about online dating users, Walther in Social Information Processing theory stated that the selective self-presentation process is very likely to be involved when someone makes a profile or biodata look more attractive. Jeff Hancock of Stanford University believes that others viewing the profile or bio will see it as a promise, and if the online self-presentation is too different from the actual, the potential matches or partners can experience feelings like when a promise is broken (Griffin et al., 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of catfish or identity fraud is generally considered one of the risks in using various online dating services platforms. Although not always accompanied by negative intentions, the practice of identity fraud is considered to be able to make an opportunity for other forms of fraud. In general, using completely different identities in the form of photos and biodata is considered to be an unacceptable form of dishonesty. However, sorting out the provided identity and personal information on the profile or biodata is considered a natural behavior because everyone tends to show their best to get a partner in online dating services. Various anticipatory efforts were made to avoid the risk of catfishing practice, such as conducting self-verification either through video calls or profiling on the internet. Even though several online dating platforms such as Tinder and Bumble provide photo verification features, further verification efforts are still required as it is believed that the real identity of online dating users can be more clearly defined through further interaction.

This study found that the four informants did not meet the perpetrators of catfishing which caused material and emotional losses. Apart from having the match-filtering mechanisms found in online dating services, informants may not have come across more extreme forms of catfishing so they can always anticipate them. To obtain a more diverse meaning of the catfishing phenomenon, it is recommended to collect more informants who represent various socio-cultural backgrounds in further research.

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