

In Te'o Story, Deception Ripped From the Screen

By Mary Pilon

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The show on MTV is called “Catfish,” and this is how it works.

In every episode of the show, a docudrama, the hosts try to unite couples who have interacted online or via telephone but have never met in person. Participants find out whether the objects of their affection are telling the truth about who they are.

In one episode, a man suspects that a pageant contestant who messaged him on Facebook may not be real. She turns out to be a friend who used pictures online to create the persona.

In another episode, a woman wants to find out the truth about Mike, a man with whom she developed an online relationship. But it is revealed that Mike is actually the creation of a woman who wanted to divert attention from an ex-boyfriend. Some lies on the show are bigger than others, but typically the reveal at the end results in surprise or, often, embarrassment at having been duped.

A so-called catfish is the engineer of the false online identity, a reference to the bottom-feeding, whiskered water dwellers. Getting catfished is when someone falls for a person online who is not necessarily real. It can involve pictures, phone calls, social media profiles, text messages, e-mails and even phony friends or family members.

Many were introduced to this strange universe of digital dupers for the first time Wednesday when Deadspin reported that Notre Dame linebacker Manti Te'o's girlfriend, whose death provided an inspirational story line for the Fighting Irish's

triumphant season, did not exist. While the details of what Te'o knew and when are still emerging, the term “catfished” exploded online with Twitter hash tags created and Google searches soaring.

Notre Dame has said that Te'o was the victim of a hoax, with Athletic Director Jack Swarbrick even mentioning the show “Catfish” during a news conference Wednesday. In a statement, Te'o called the situation “painful and humiliating.” It is unclear whether Te'o had a role in the hoax or lied about aspects of the relationship.



Notre Dame has said that Manti Te'o was the victim of a hoax in which a person used a false online identity and pretended to be his girlfriend. David J. Phillip/Associated Press

The term “catfishing” became popular with the release of the 2010 documentary film “Catfish,” which follows a man’s relationship with a woman on Facebook and his quest to find out whether she is real. The TV show of the same name followed on MTV.

For those who have immersed themselves in that world, the Te'o story was not surprising.

Andrew Jarecki, a producer of the film and an executive producer of the television show, said Te'o's experience sounded typical.

"We've been living this experience for years," Jarecki said.

He said part of what inspired the idea for the television show was the number of inquiries those involved with the film received about being potential victims and even perpetrators after the documentary's release.

"It's a new category of charades," Jarecki said. "It was only a matter of time before it happened to someone famous."

He said that while many of the tools used in catfish schemes — Facebook, Twitter and cellphones — were modern, the genesis of the trend was age-old: loneliness. Even though most computers are equipped with tools to video chat, he pointed out, many of those who become duped by online personalities stick to the phone and pictures. Te'o has said that he spoke at length with a woman he thought was named Lennay Kekua on the phone and received text messages from her brother.

"It's about finding someone who feels real to you," Jarecki said. "In the Internet, the person is satisfying that need. That's why he says he's embarrassed. You have people who are drawn into a situation."

For the most part, catfishing is not against the law, said Bradley Shear, a Washington-based lawyer who has examined legal issues related to social media. Some states have laws that criminalize impersonating someone, but not necessarily creating a fictitious person.

Andrew Jarecki, in 2003, is an executive producer of the MTV show “Catfish.” Douglas C. Pizac/Associated Press

Real people in a picture that was used by a catfish to create a fake identity could have a claim because their likeness was used without permission, Shear said. Legal details may vary by state, and most laws are focused on identity theft, in which someone steals an identity for financial gain rather than for matters of cyberheartbreak.

Should Te'o pursue damages and claim that he lost an endorsement opportunity or that his N.F.L. draft position suffered as a result of the girlfriend hoax, he could face an uphill battle in court, Shear said.

“It’s very difficult to win,” he said. “You have to prove that direct, causal connection.”

Deception online is far from new. About 81 percent of people misrepresented their weight, height or age in their online dating profiles, according to research from Catalina L. Toma, an assistant professor of communications at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

“People lie frequently online, but the amount by which they lied was small,” Toma said. “Technologically, it’s effortless to lie. Theoretically, deception is easy.”

Becoming a catfish or falling prey to one is understandable and perhaps more common in an era of heavy texting, e-mailing and online chatting, she said.

Andrea Baker, a sociologist at Ohio University who has studied online relationships and communities, said: “I totally understand how these emotions develop. These are people who are lonesome who turn out to be romantics rather than realists. They buy into some deep bond.”

Even highly intelligent people may find themselves susceptible to such a hoax, Baker said, part of the public’s fascination with the catfish phenomenon and the Te’o story.

“I think people really identify with this thought — ‘There’s someone out there for me; it’s just a matter of finding that person,’ ” Baker said. “It’s a fantasy for a lot of people that the online person could be it, but knowing underneath it could be too good to be true. And there’s the idea that we’re trying to learn something from these experiences because we could also be caught up in it ourselves.”

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