



Catfishing as a Manifestation of *Al-Khida*: A Perspective from Tafsir al-Maraghi

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital communication has transformed patterns of social interaction while creating new opportunities for identity manipulation in cyberspace. One of the increasingly prevalent phenomena is *catfishing*, the use of fictitious online identities to deceive others for emotional, social, or personal gain. Despite extensive discussions on the psychological and social consequences of *catfishing*, its ethical and theological dimensions remain underexplored within Quranic studies. This article aims to examine the concept of *al-khida* in the Quran through the perspective of *Tafsir al-Maraghi* by Ahmad Mustafa al-Maraghi and to analyze its relevance to contemporary *catfishing* practices. The article employs a qualitative approach using content analysis. Primary data consist of Quranic verses related to *al-khida* and their interpretations in *Tafsir al-Maraghi*, while secondary sources include scholarly literature on Quranic exegesis, Islamic ethics, and digital communication. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using descriptive-analytical content analysis within the framework of *adabi ijtima'i* exegesis. The findings reveal that *al-khida* represents a process of self-deception and manipulation characterized by the loss of moral self-awareness, *taẓẓin* (self-adornment), and the construction of false security. These characteristics correspond closely to the fabrication of virtual identities and misleading self-representation in *catfishing*. The study contributes a Quranic ethical framework for understanding digital deception and highlights the urgency of strengthening value-based digital ethics in contemporary online environments.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic evolution of information and communication technology in the digital age has fundamentally transformed the landscape of social interaction. The internet has not only accelerated the exchange of information but also created a virtual communication space that allows individuals to interact without being limited by time or place. In Indonesia, internet penetration rates continue to show significant growth. Data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) indicates that by early 2024, the number of internet users had reached 221.5 million people, or approximately 79.5% of the total national population (Prasetyo et al., 2024). This situation indicates that the digital space has become an integral part of modern society's social life. However, increased digital connectivity is not always

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accompanied by a corresponding strengthening of ethical awareness in communication (Ma'rifah, 2025; Sari & Hidayatulloh, 2025). The characteristics of the virtual world which offer anonymity, flexibility of identity, and a lack of direct social control often create opportunities for various forms of deviant communication behavior, including identity manipulation and self-representation.

One phenomenon that is increasingly prevalent on social media and online dating apps is catfishing (Putri & Hamzah, 2022). This phenomenon refers to the act of creating or using a fake virtual identity by exploiting a name, photos, life story, or other personal attributes to construct a fictional persona in the digital space (Salsabila, 2024). Through this fabricated identity, the perpetrator seeks to gain trust, build emotional closeness, or exploit the victim for specific gains, whether material or non-material (Nurdin, 2021). From an Islamic ethical perspective, such practices contradict the principles of *al-ṣidq* (honesty) and *al-amānah* (integrity), which form the cornerstone of social relationships (Mursidah, 2025). Therefore, catfishing can be understood not only as a psychological and social issue but also as a moral issue related to the abuse of trust and the manipulation of identity.

The phenomenon of catfishing has drawn the attention of various academic disciplines, ranging from digital communication, psychology, and criminology to media studies. Research by Robi'ah, (2026) shows that catfishing is generally carried out through the manipulation of personal identity to create a self-image that is more ideal than reality. From a psychological perspective, Lerik et al., (2025) explain that catfishing behavior is influenced by the need for social recognition, the desire to construct an ideal identity, and the tendency to present a self-image that is more socially acceptable. These findings align with the research by (Putri et al., 2025), which identified a relationship between catfishing, impression management, narcissism, and the need for social validation.

Other research indicates that the motives behind catfishing are not limited to seeking romantic relationships but also include entertainment, identity exploration, and financial gain (Salsabila, 2024). In fact, (Damayanti et al., 2026) found that catfishing often escalates into a love scam a form of fraud that exploits the victim's emotional attachment to gain financial advantage. From the victim's perspective, Kristy et al., (2023) revealed that catfishing can cause various psychological effects, such as a loss of trust, anxiety, anger, depression, and an identity crisis. Meanwhile, Arisanty et al., (2025) emphasized that strengthening digital literacy plays a crucial role in minimizing the risk of becoming a victim of identity manipulation in cyberspace.

Although various studies have examined the motives, characteristics, and impacts of catfishing, the ongoing discourse remains dominated by perspectives from digital communication, cyberpsychology, and criminology. These studies have not yet extensively examined catfishing from the perspective of Quranic studies, particularly through an exegetical approach. In fact, when examined substantively, the practice of catfishing shares characteristics very closely aligned with the concept of *al-khidā'* in the Quran. The word *khada'a* and its various derivatives are used in the Quran to describe acts of deception carried out by concealing reality and presenting an image that differs from the actual situation. In the context of the Quran, *al-khidā'* is often associated with the behavior of hypocrites who outwardly display piety, while inwardly harboring something contrary to what they project. Although they occur in different contexts, both *al-khidā'* and catfishing operate through the manipulation of identity, the engineering of perceptions, and the abuse of trust to achieve specific goals.

To understand this relationship, Tafsīr al-Marāghī by Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī serves as a relevant reference. This exegesis is known for its *adabī ijtima'i* approach, which emphasizes the connection between the message of the Quran and

the social realities of society. In his interpretation, Al-Marāghī views *al-khidā'* not only as an act of deceiving others but also as a form of self-deception arising from a loss of moral consciousness, which ultimately leads to harm for both the perpetrator and society. This perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of catfishing not merely as a deviation in digital communication, but as a manifestation of manipulative behavior with ethical, psychological, and theological dimensions.

Previous studies have examined catfishing from the perspectives of digital communication, cyberpsychology, criminology, and digital literacy (Anggraeni, 2025). Meanwhile, studies on *al-khidā'* in the Quran generally focus on linguistic and theological aspects, as well as the characteristics of hypocrisy. To date, research linking the concept of *al-khidā'* in Tafsīr al-Marāghī to the phenomenon of catfishing as a form of virtual identity manipulation in the digital age remains very limited. Consequently, there is an academic gap between the Quran's normative concept of deception (*al-khidā'*) and the reality of identity manipulation practices that have emerged in contemporary digital society.

Based on a search of the Scopus database, a study on catfishing as a manifestation identified 5 documents over the past 2 years (2025–2026). This analysis clearly shows that no studies related to catfishing as a manifestation of *Al-Khida* were found. Below is a visualization of the bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer.



Fig. 1. Analisis visual menggunakan Vosviewer terkait Catfishing as a Manifestation of Al-Khida berdasarkan kata kunci Catfishing and manipulation (Base data Scopus 2025–2026)

The novelty of this article lies in its attempt to contextualize the concept of *al-khidā'* in Tafsīr al-Marāghī in relation to the phenomenon of catfishing as a form of virtual identity fraud in the digital age. Unlike previous studies that have focused on psychological, communicative, or cybercrime aspects, this article employs content analysis of Al-Marāghī's exegesis to construct a conceptual framework linking *al-khidā'*, self-deception, digital identity manipulation, and the resulting psychosocial impacts. This article also offers a new perspective by using Quranic exegesis as a theoretical foundation for understanding contemporary digital communication phenomena.

Theoretically, this article contributes to the development of thematic exegesis that links the values of the Quran to the challenges of the digital society. Practically, the findings of this article can serve as a foundation for strengthening digital literacy grounded in Islamic values, particularly in raising awareness about the importance of honesty, integrity, and moral responsibility in online interactions. Furthermore, this article can serve as a reference for academics, educators, digital media practitioners, and the general public in understanding and preventing various forms of identity

manipulation that have the potential to harm individuals and communities in the digital age.

METHODS

This article employs a qualitative approach focused on gaining a deep understanding of the text's meaning and its underlying social context. This approach was chosen because studies of *al-khida'* in the Quran not only require an analysis of linguistic structure and the interpretation of verses but also necessitate a dialogue with contemporary realities, particularly the phenomenon of catfishing in the digital age. Therefore, this study combines Quranic exegesis with the study of communication psychology through an interdisciplinary approach to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between deceptive behavior (*al-khida'*) and the practice of identity manipulation in cyberspace. The research process was conducted systematically, ranging from data collection and organization to textual content analysis and the interpretation of findings, in order to construct a conceptual synthesis regarding the relevance of Quranic values to contemporary digital communication issues.

Methods and Type

This article employs a qualitative approach using content analysis. This method was chosen because it allows the author to identify, interpret, and gain a deep understanding of the concept of *al-khida'* in the Quran, as well as its relevance to the phenomenon of catfishing in the digital age. Content analysis is used to systematically examine the meanings, patterns, and messages contained in the text of the Quran and its exegeses, thereby yielding a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Armita, 2025; Efendi et al., 2026; Engkizar et al., 2025; Krippendorff, 2022; Lerik et al., 2025; Saminu et al., 2025). Methodologically, this article integrates a normative-theological study of the Quran with the perspective of communication psychology as an auxiliary science to explain the relationship between deceptive behavior (*al-khida'*) and the practice of digital identity manipulation.

Data Sources

The data sources in this article consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data consists of verses from the Quran containing the term *khada'a* and its derivatives, as well as their interpretations in Tafsir al-Maraghi by Ahmad Mustafa al-Maraghi. Secondary data was obtained from various relevant academic sources, such as exegetical works, books on Quranic sciences, books on social psychology, articles in reputable journals, scientific proceedings, and previous studies discussing catfishing, digital identity manipulation, self-deception, self-defeating behavior, and the ethics of digital communication (Adel et al., 2025; Bowen, 2009; Engkizar et al., 2026; Prasetya, 2026; Saminu et al., 2025). The selection of data sources was based on their substantial relevance to the focus of the study and their contribution to strengthening the research analysis.

Instruments

The primary instrument in this study was the author (human instrument), who played a role in the processes of data collection, selection, reduction, interpretation, and analysis. To support these processes, auxiliary instruments were used, including documentation sheets, data cards, a thematic categorization matrix, and a reference management tool designed to catalog and group data based on relevant themes. The use of these instruments aims to ensure consistency in the analysis and facilitate the organization of data throughout the research process.

Data Analysis Tools

The analytical tool used in this article is the thematic interpretation approach (*tafsir maudhu'i*) to identify and connect Quranic verses related to the concept of *al-khida'*. In addition, this study utilizes an interdisciplinary analytical framework based

on social psychology theories, specifically the theories of cognitive dissonance (Engkizar et al., 2025), self-deception (Tice & Baumeister, 1997), and self-defeating behavior, as tools to explain the psychological dynamics underlying the practices of identity manipulation and self-deception in the phenomenon of catfishing.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, we identified and cataloged the verses of the Quran that contain the term *khada'a* and its derivatives. Second, examining the linguistic context and analyzing the interpretation of the verses based on Tafsir al-Marāghī. Third, grouping the data into thematic categories related to manipulation, *tazyin* (false self-image), self-deception, and the abuse of trust. Fourth, conducting an interpretation using a thematic (*maudhū'i*) exegetical approach to formulate a conceptual framework of *al-khida'* from Al-Marāghī's perspective. Fifth, engaging these findings in dialogue with social psychology theories and digital communication studies to analyze their relevance to the phenomenon of catfishing. Through these stages, a conceptual synthesis is obtained that explains that catfishing is a contemporary manifestation of *al-khida'* that operates through the construction of false identities, the manipulation of perception, and the exploitation of trust in the digital space. Thus, the resulting analysis is not merely descriptive but also provides a theoretical foundation for the development of digital ethics grounded in Quranic values. For greater clarity, the author will present the methodological details in the following figure.

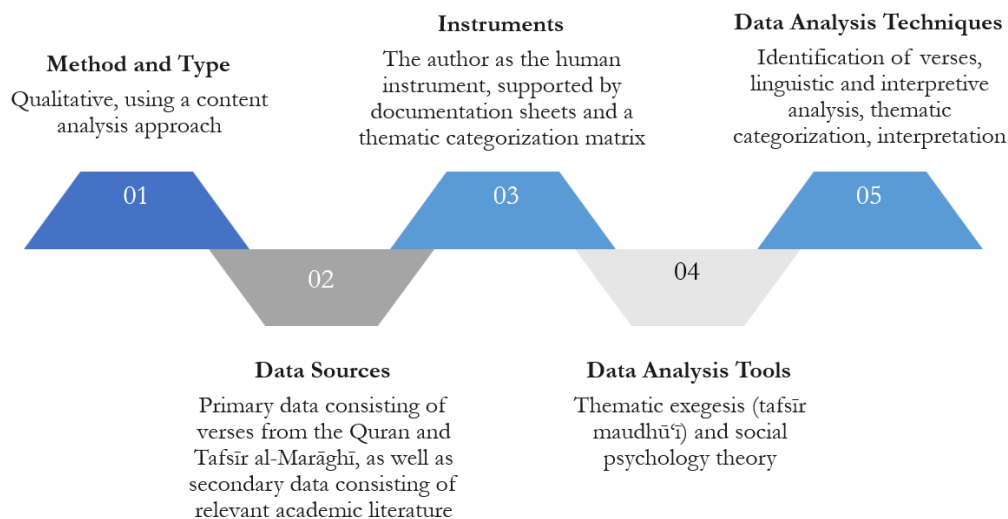


Fig 2. Stages of the research method

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Quran not only contains dogmatic laws of worship but also provides comprehensive guidance on ethics, psychology, and the dynamics of social relationships (Rahma, 2025). One psychosocial aspect that receives serious attention in the Quran is deceptive behavior (*al-khida'*), which, in Al-Marāghī's exegesis, is understood as a form of inner deviation resulting from the loss of personal honesty.

Linguistically and thematically, the term *al-khida'*, which is derived from the root word *khada'a* along with all its derivatives, appears five times in the Quran. Based on an examination of the Quranic text, these words are distributed across three main verses, all of which are classified as Madaniyah, namely: First, Surah Al-Baqarah [2]: 9: This explains the actions of hypocrites who seek to deceive Allah and the believers, though in reality they are only deceiving themselves. Second, Surah An-Nisa [4]: 142: This explains the deceit of the hypocrites in their prayers, which they perform half-heartedly and for show. Third, Surah Al-Anfal [8]: 62: This describes the potential for deceit by the enemy through offers of tactical peace.

The Concept of *Al-Khidā* According to Ahmad Musthafa Al-Marāghī

In Al-Marāghī's exegesis, *al-khidā*' is analyzed not merely as verbal deception, but as a psychological phenomenon rooted in a troubled inner state. According to Al-Marāghī, this mechanism of deception operates through three main psychological phases:

First, the Essence of *Al-Khidā*' as Cognitive (Mental) Dissonance. Fundamentally, Al-Marāghī explains that the evil tendencies within a person will not strengthen unless one has succeeded in deceiving oneself. The perpetrator of *al-khidā*' is essentially in the midst of a fierce inner struggle a clash between the voice of conscience urging honesty and the impulses of desire seeking gain or temporary security. Al-Marāghī uses the classical Arabic expression *yusyāwiru nafsaihi* (he is in consultation with his two selves) to describe the mental tension experienced by the perpetrator before carrying out his deception.

From the perspective of modern psychology, this state of inner conflict aligns with the theory of cognitive dissonance. The perpetrator is aware of the conflict between their values of truth and the manipulative actions they are about to commit. To alleviate this psychological tension and eliminate feelings of guilt, the perpetrator employs *al-khidā*' as a coping mechanism.

Second is the Mechanism of Self-Deception. Deception carried out repeatedly (*mukhāda'ah*) will gradually erode the perpetrator's moral sensitivity. Al-Marāghī asserts that this habit of deceiving stems from the loss of *muhāsabah* (self-evaluation) and the fading sense of being watched by Allah (*muraqabatul-Llah*) (Maraghi, 2001). When this inner vigilance fades, the perpetrator is no longer able to distinguish between honesty and lies, so that manipulative behavior shifts from merely an incidental act to a deeply ingrained habit or character trait.

This mechanism of self-deception is further reinforced through the process of *tazayin* the act of embellishing or adorning falsehood to create a superficial image. The perpetrator deliberately displays formalistic obedience, sweet words, or symbols of outward goodness to conceal the corruption of their intentions within their heart. This strategy of embellishment creates a false sense of security, in which the perpetrator feels extremely confident that their malicious schemes will never be exposed by others, when in reality they have become trapped in a moral anesthesia that paralyzes their common sense (Pebiyanti et al., 2025).

Third, Destructive Implications (Self-Defeating Behavior). Based on the principle of *sunnatullah* in the Quran, the act of *al-khidā*' is, in essence, self-destructive. Al-Marāghī makes a sharp assertion when interpreting the clause *wa mā yakhdā'una illā anfusahum*, stating that the harmful effects and dangers of such deceit will inevitably return to the deceivers themselves. Based on the principle of *sunnatullah* in the Quran, the act of *al-khidā*' is, in essence, self-destructive. Al-Marāghī makes a strong point when interpreting the clause *wa mā yakhdā'una illā anfusahum*, stating that the negative consequences and dangers of such deception will inevitably rebound upon the perpetrator. Success in deceiving others is merely an illusory victory that actually accelerates the collapse of the perpetrator's dignity and human integrity.

From a social psychology perspective, this phenomenon is highly relevant to the theory of self-defeating behavior. The success of the perpetrator's manipulation actually backfires, extinguishing the light of their inner honesty (Suwartini, 2016). The perpetrator risks losing their true self, becoming ensnared in chronic anxiety over the exposure of their lies, and becoming isolated in a crisis of social trust. Ultimately, the cunning tactics so proudly boasted by the perpetrator of *al-khidā*' actually become the gateway that plunges them into the darkness of identity and the ruin of life, both in this world and in the hereafter.

The Relevance of the Concept of *Al-Khidā'* to the Phenomenon of Catfishing

A comparative analysis reveals a highly precise conceptual relevance between *al-khidā'* as interpreted by Al-Marāghī and the phenomenon of catfishing in the digital age, as summarized in the following table:

Table 1. The Relevance of the Concept of *Al-Khidā'* to the Phenomenon of Catfishing

Indicators The Interpretation of <i>Al-Khidā'</i> (Al-Marāghī)	Manifestations of the Catfishing Phenomenon in the Digital Age	Psychological Relevance
Cognitive Dissonance and Internal Conflict	The Construction of a Fake Virtual Identity	The individual experiences digital dissonance due to their self-confidence (real life), which leads them to create an avatar or fictional account (ideal self)
The Mechanism of <i>Taẓyīn</i> (The Adornment of Falsehood)	Curated Profile Mechanism	Perpetrators manipulate photos, filters, and success narratives to conceal their true identities, which triggers acute self-deception.
Implications Destructive (<i>Wa Ma Yasyurun</i>)	Self-Defeating Behavior	The perpetrator is trapped in chronic anxiety, the fear of being exposed, and a loss of identity in the physical world

An Islamic Legal Review

Based on the theological-moral analysis in Tafsir Al-Marāghī, the phenomenon of catfishing in the digital age cannot be viewed merely as a game of false identities, but rather as a cybercrime correlated with various criminal schemes. In practice, catfishing is often combined with love scams (romance fraud), online store scams, and even fictitious investment schemes that cause financial losses and psychological trauma for victims (Segara et al., 2025). From a normative-juridical Islamic perspective, this practice involves elements of lying (*al-kadẓ*), deception (*al-khidā'*), and the dissemination of misleading information that undermines the ethical framework of communication and the security of transactions (Salcedo et al., 2024).

The prohibition against the practice of catfishing, which aims to exploit victims, is based on the Quran's explicit prohibition against unlawfully taking possession of another person's property. Allah the Almighty states in Surah An-Nisa [4]: 29: "O you who have believed, do not consume one another's wealth unjustly, except through trade conducted by mutual consent among you" (O you who have believed, do not consume one another's wealth unjustly, except through trade conducted on the basis of mutual consent among you). According to Al-Marāghī's interpretation, the phrase *bil-bāṭil* encompasses all transactions or manipulative actions that harm another party without genuine consent, including the fabrication of fictitious profiles to lure and drain the victim's material and emotional resources.

Furthermore, the prohibition against catfishing is reinforced by the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, which strictly forbids deception and manipulation in any form. It is narrated from Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: “*Man ghasysyanā fa laisa minnā*” (Whoever deceives us is not one of us Narrated by Muslim, no. 101) (Riani et al., 2026).

This hadith affirms that the behavior of *ghisyy* (deception and manipulation of information) nullifies the perfection of one’s faith and excludes the perpetrator from the ranks of the community that emulates prophetic ethics. In the context of catfishing, the fabrication of photos, names, and fictional personas constitutes a form of digital *ghisyy* that substantially misleads one’s online interlocutor.

In general, Islam prohibits all forms of catfishing because this behavior explicitly reflects the characteristics of hypocrisy (*nifāq*). As emphasized in the Quran and the Hadith, a Muslim’s integrity is measured by the harmony between their outward and inward aspects. The act of concealing one’s true identity to deceive others is a manifestation of *nifāq ‘amali*, which is strictly prohibited. Therefore, refraining from catfishing and upholding the ethic of honesty (*ash-shidq*) in online transactions is a religious obligation to safeguard the honor (*hifẓ al-‘ird*) and property (*hifẓ al-māl*) of the community.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the concept of *al-khidā*’ in *Tafsir al-Marāghī* and analyzed its relevance to the phenomenon of *catfishing* in the digital era. The findings reveal that *al-khidā*’ is not merely an act of deceiving others but a multidimensional behavior rooted in a crisis of moral consciousness and sustained through processes of *self-deception*, image construction (*tazayin*), and the development of a false sense of security. From Al-Marāghī’s perspective, such behavior ultimately leads to the erosion of personal integrity, psychological disorientation, and social harm. These findings demonstrate that *al-khidā*’ encompasses theological, ethical, psychological, and social dimensions, making it a relevant Quranic framework for understanding contemporary forms of deceptive behavior in digital environments.

The study further concludes that *catfishing* constitutes a contemporary manifestation of *al-khidā*’, particularly through the fabrication of virtual identities, misleading self-representation, and the exploitation of trust for emotional, social, or financial gain. The novelty of this article lies in its interdisciplinary analytical framework that integrates the Quranic concept of *al-khidā*’ in *Tafsir al-Marāghī* with theories of *cognitive dissonance*, *self-deception*, and *self-defeating behavior* to explain identity manipulation in digital spaces. This approach offers a new perspective by positioning *catfishing* not only as a communication or psychological issue but also as an ethical and spiritual problem viewed through the lens of Quranic teachings. The findings contribute theoretically to the development of interdisciplinary studies linking Quranic exegesis, social psychology, and digital communication. Practically, they highlight the importance of strengthening Quran-based digital ethics, particularly the values of *al-ṣidq* (truthfulness), *amānah* (integrity), and moral responsibility, as essential foundations for fostering trustworthy, ethical, and socially responsible digital interactions.

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Author contribution

Ulfatunnisa: data curation, writing-original draft preparation, analysis, **Endang Saiful Anwar:** conceptualization, methodology, **Ina Salmah Febriani:** visualization, and editing.

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The data and the grammatical structure in this article have been validated and verified by English language experts and no AI-generated sentences are included in this article.

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Ethical clearance

The research company has agreed to carry out the research and is willing if the results of this research are published.

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