

Which Me Should I Be?

Essential Question

What are the benefits and risks of presenting yourself in different ways online?

Lesson Overview

Students learn that presenting themselves in different ways online carries both benefits and risks.


Students first consider what it means to adopt a different identity online. Next, they watch the video, “**Henry’s Story – Creating Online Identities**,” and discuss their responses to the different ways Henry presents himself to others on the Internet. Students complete the **Take a Stand Student Handout**, where they explore the ethics of exaggerating, deceiving, or adopting a different identity online. They complete the lesson by reflecting on the choices they make when they present themselves in different ways online, and the benefits and risks involved in doing so.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to ...

- reflect on the benefits and risks of presenting their identities in different ways online.
- evaluate – from an ethical point of view – the feelings, motivations, contexts, and possible outcomes associated with adopting different roles online.
- judge whether certain ways people present themselves online are harmless or harmful.

Materials and Preparation

-  Preview the video, “**Henry’s Story – Creating Online Identities**,” and be prepared to play the video for the class.
- Copy the **Take a Stand Student Handout**, one for each student.
- Review the **Take a Stand Student Handout – Teacher Version**.
- Prepare the classroom by clearing space in the room and creating a HARMLESS/HARMFUL line with tape down the center of the room (Teach 2).

Family Resources

- Send home the **Self-Expression and Identity Family Tip Sheet (Middle School)**.

Estimated time: 45 minutes

Standards Alignment –

Common Core: RI.6-8.2-3, RI.6.7-8, RI.7-8.8, RI.7-8.10, W.6-8.4, W.6-8.10, SL.6-8.1a-d, SL.6-8.2, SL.6-8.6, L.6-8.6, RST.6-8.2, RST.6-8.4, RST.6-8.10, WHST.6-8.4, WHST.6-8.10

NETS-S: 1a, 1b, 4a, 4c, 4d, 5a

Key Vocabulary –

identity: all of the factors that make up who you are

exaggerate: to say something is more or greater than it actually is

deceive: to mislead or falsely persuade others

motivate: to have a reason or purpose to do something

consequences: results; something that happens as an effect of a certain cause

anonymous: having an unknown identity

introduction

Warm-up (5 minutes)

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary term **identity**.

ASK:

Do people ever express parts of their identities online that they might not express offline?

Guide students to recognize that people sometimes present themselves differently on the Internet than they would face to face.

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary terms **exaggerate** and **deceive**.

ASK:

Have you ever heard of people who exaggerated something about themselves online?

Sample responses:

- A girl who exaggerated how many celebrities she had met, so that other people would be impressed
- A kid who exaggerated his experience to get a job on the school paper

Have you ever heard about people who deceive others by pretending to be someone else while they were on the Internet? Why do you think they did this?

Sample responses:

- Someone might pretend to be someone else trying to be mean or attempting to play a trick
- Someone might create several avatars for an online virtual game

DISCUSS with students where these events took place (which website or online community). Solicit their initial thoughts on whether it is a good idea to do the kinds of things they described, and why.

teach 1

Henry's Story (15 minutes)

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary terms **motivate**, **consequences**, and **anonymous** with students. Explain that the last term will play an important part in the activity they will do following the movie.

REMINDE the class that it's perfectly normal to try out different identities online. However, they have to think about what motivates them to do so, and the possible consequences. Tell them:

- *Sometimes you might express different parts of your personality online because you want to be accepted by friends or people in an online community. Or you might do it to experiment and see how others react.*
- *Other times, you might cross over into lying to or deceiving others by pretending you are someone you're not.*
- *It is important that you take responsibility for who you are and what you want to be online, and also consider how this might affect people you interact with online.*

EXPLAIN to the class you will now show them a video about Henry, a real boy who enjoys participating in an online world where he doesn't (fully) reveal his identity.

 **SHOW** the “**Henry’s Story – Creating Online Identities**” video to the class.

ASK:

What do you think motivates Henry to hide his age?

Henry wants to fit into the community and not be judged by his age. He doesn’t want to have to “prove” himself.

What were the consequences of Henry hiding his age?

In this case, Henry’s deception did not seem to harm himself or anyone else. On the positive side, Henry feels more respected because he is treated like an adult.

ENCOURAGE students to keep the story of Henry in mind as you move on to the next activity.

teach 2

Take a Stand (20 minutes)

DISTRIBUTE copies of the **Take a Stand Student Handout**, one to each student.

EXPLAIN to students that you are going to read aloud the scenarios from the handout. As you read each scenario, they should move to the spot on the tape line that represents where on the spectrum of HARMLESS/HARMFUL they believe the behavior falls. (Alternative: If space is an issue, students can place sticky notes with their names on them on a line on the board.)

GUIDE students to complete the activity, referring to the **Take a Stand Student Handout – Teacher Version** for detailed instructions.

REVIEW the ethical questions involved in trying different identities online. Remind students that doing this can have both benefits and risks. These depend in large part on what motivates people to present themselves differently, as well as the online settings and situations. All these can affect the consequences of their actions. Students need to be especially careful about exaggerating or deceiving others online, because this can often have harmful consequences.

closing

Wrap-up (5 minutes)

You can use these questions to assess your students’ understanding of the lesson objectives. You may want to ask students to reflect in writing on one of the questions, using a journal or an online blog/wiki.

ASK:

What motivates people to present themselves differently online than in person?

Students should name different intentions that people might have for taking on an alternative identity, or for acting anonymously, online. People may do it to protect themselves, or simply to have fun. They also may do it to deceive others.

What consequences – positive or negative – might people experience if they present themselves differently online?

On the positive side, people may feel freer to be themselves and share their thoughts, or explore interests that they might not explore in real life. On the downside, they may get into uncomfortable situations pretending to be someone else. Or people may discover that they are lying about their true identity.

How can presenting oneself differently online impact other people?

Some people who take on a different identity online may feel freer to say hurtful comments that they wouldn't say in person, especially if they are acting anonymously. People may also lie or exaggerate, which can create a climate of mean-spiritedness or distrust online.

Extension Activity

Have students choose a spot on the HARMLESS/HARMFUL spectrum. Then ask them write a fictitious story in which someone adopts a different identity online. Students may want to use ReadWriteThink's interactive Conflict Map (<http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/storymap>) for prewriting. Encourage student to conclude their stories by detailing those end consequences - positive or negative - related to the spot they chose on the line.

At-Home Activity

To further explore what it feels like to try out a different role online, have students work with a friend or family member to make avatars for celebrities and give them screen names. Students and their parents can create free online avatars by visiting Meez (www.meez.com) or DoppelMe (www.doppelme.com), or they can draw them by hand offline. Highlight the following questions for students and family members to consider about their famous person's avatar:

- *Why did you choose certain elements of identity for your celebrity's avatar?*
- *What does the avatar say about the celebrity or famous person?*
- *How would the avatar change depending on what online community they are interacting with (e.g., what website are they on, and how do people interact there?)*
- *How might the avatar be different if the celebrity or famous person made it?*

Which Me Should I Be?

Directions

Take a stand!

Look at the line in the room that says HARMLESS on one end and HARMFUL on the other.

Now look at the case studies below. These case studies describe situations in which people present themselves in different ways online. If you think what somebody did was *really* harmful, stand at the harmful end. If you think it's *totally* harmless, stand at the harmless end. If you think it's a little bit of both or somewhere in between, stand in the middle.

HARMLESS - - - - - **HARMFUL**

Before you take your stand on the line, ask yourself:

- What **motivates** this person to present himself or herself differently online?
- What are the **consequences** of the person's actions? How do you think it might end up affecting the person? How might it affect other people?
- Do you think it is okay to present a different identity in this situation? Why or why not?

Case Studies

1. Mikayla isn't old enough to have a public profile on MyFace. Her parents also don't allow her to have one yet. But all of her friends are on MyFace. So she creates a fake profile with the name Kayla. She puts all kinds of information about herself there, like photos, videos, and all the things she would want to share about herself. She tells her friends about her fake profile so they can become her friends online. She keeps it a secret from her family.
2. Brian likes to chat on a sports fan site that has IM (instant messaging). People only know him by his screen name, so no one knows his true identity. Brian likes to start debates in chat rooms by responding to people's posts about the best teams, players, and stats. He sometimes says things he wouldn't say offline. A couple of times he has said bad words and called people stupid.
3. Arianna visits a website that makes fun of a student at her school. She logs in under a fake name and leaves mean comments without anyone knowing who she is.
4. Jolie, who is 12, creates a fake social networking profile with a different name that says she's 18. She uses a photo where she's dressed up and wearing sunglasses, so it's hard to tell how old she is. She starts a relationship with an older guy she meets online. He's really fallen for her and wants to meet her in person.

5. Alejandro wants good reviews and comments on his YouTube videos, so he creates several user names. He uses them to leave good comments about his own videos.
6. Rob doesn't normally get good grades. But on a website for people looking for summer jobs where he has a profile, Rob says that he gets straight A's. He thinks this might help his chances of getting a job.
7. Becky thought it was funny to join the "I hate redheads" group on her profile page. She just thought it was a silly group to join, even though she doesn't really hate people with red hair. The next day, her friend Maureen (who has red hair) avoided her at school.
8. In real life Phil is a quiet, shy guy. But when he's texting he feels more outgoing than he does in person, and sometimes he says things he normally wouldn't say. A girl who has the same math teacher as Phil texts him asking for the answers to the math quiz: "hey cutie phil ... giv me quiz answers PLZ!!" Phil likes the girl and wants to be her friend, but he would never share answers in person, and he knows he could get in trouble. He decides to text her the answers anyway.
9. Emma likes to play GoEscape, a virtual game world where players use avatars to play. She pretends to be a boy and uses a male avatar because she thinks she'll be more accepted by the other players. She interacts with others in the game through her avatar, and has made a couple of really close friends through the game.
10. Caroline likes Ethan, a guy in class. She knows where he hangs out online. She pretends to be a boy named Mike from another city who has the same interests as Ethan, so she can join his online community. She becomes his friend as "Mike" to get to know more about Ethan.

Use Common Sense!

When you decide to change some or all of your identity online, how do you know whether it is harmless or harmful? Pay attention to how you feel, and think about how someone else might feel if they knew. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I feel good about doing this? Or do I feel as though I'm doing something wrong?
- Am I harming others? Am I harming myself?
- Am I still true to who I am on the inside?
- Would I do this or say this in person, with people I know?

Which Me Should I Be?

Directions

In this activity, students consider the different ways people present themselves online, and make judgments about the ethical implications of their actions. Students review brief case studies in which someone exaggerates something about himself or herself, hides part of his or her identity, or adopts a completely different identity online. The goal of this activity is for students to consider the benefits and risks of using exaggeration or deception online, and to judge whether a given situation is harmful or harmless.

To prepare for the activity, clear the desks out of the way to create an open space in the classroom. Place a long line of tape across the room with a sheet taped to the floor that says **HARMLESS** at one end and **HARMFUL** at the other. (If you do not have the space to have students stand on a line, you can draw a line on the board and have students use sticky notes to represent their positions.)

HARMLESS - - - - - HARMFUL

DISRIBUTE the **Take a Stand Student Handout**.

EXPLAIN to students that they will use the HARMLESS/HARMFUL line to show responses to various situations in which someone presents themselves differently online. Tell students that you will be reading case studies – brief descriptions – about things that kids did on the Internet. They will decide how harmful or harmless the kid’s actions were, and then they will take a stand on the line.

REMINDE students to think of the example of Henry from the video vignette. Do they believe that the example of Henry, where he is assumed by others to be an adult, is harmless or harmful? Where would they stand on the line in that scenario? Invite a few volunteers to express their views by standing on the line.

REVIEW the criteria students will use to make their judgments by having them read aloud the three bulleted questions that appear near the beginning of the student handout. Review the vocabulary words **exaggerate**, **deceive**, **motivate**, and **consequences**. Encourage students to use these words when explaining their responses to the questions.

- *What **motivates** this person to present himself or herself differently online? (Guide students to consider the motivation of the person who is adopting a different identity online. Are they doing it to protect themselves? To have fun? To deceive someone else?)*
- *What are the **consequences** of the person’s actions? How do you think it might end up affecting the person? How might it affect other people? (Encourage students to reflect on the scenario from the point of view of the person who changed his or her identity, and from the point of view of others who interact with the person online. How would different people feel, and how would they be affected?)*
- *Do you think it’s okay to present a different identity in this situation? Why or why not? (Ask students to think about whether it is harmful or harmless, based on the information provided.)*

Give groups 10 to 15 minutes to read their case studies and discuss them. Let students know that though the goal is to reach a consensus, all members of a group may not agree. Once they have had time to discuss the case studies, read each scenario aloud and have a volunteer from each group come forward and stand on a spot along the HARMLESS/HARMFUL line. If members of a group strongly disagree, allow multiple members of a group to come forward and stand on different places on the line. Have each group explain its choice, and invite classmates to respond.

Though students will have their own thoughts and reasoning about each situation, you can use the following ideas to guide class discussion:

1. *Mikayla isn't old enough to have a public profile on MyFace. Her parents also don't allow her to have one yet. But all of her friends are on MyFace. So she creates a fake profile with the name Kayla. She puts all kinds of information about herself there, like photos, videos, and all the things she would want to share about herself. She tells her friends about her fake profile so they can become her friends online. She keeps it a secret from her family.*

(Guide students to consider the motivation of Mikayla, and question her secrecy from her family. According to Facebook, you must be 13 years old to sign up, and for MySpace you must be 14 years old. By lying about her age, Mikayla deceives others online. By hiding her actions from her family, she deceives them as well. She harms herself, and she harms her family members by lying to them.)

2. *Brian likes to chat on a sports fan site that has IM (instant messaging). People only know him by his screen name, so no one knows his true identity. Brian likes to start debates in chat rooms by responding to people's posts about the best teams, players, and stats. He sometimes says things he wouldn't say offline. A couple of times he uses bad words and calls people stupid.*

(Guide students to think about why Brian may feel freer to start debates online, where he is anonymous. Would Brian do the same thing with people if they were face to face? Why might Brian want to start debates? How is his behavior affecting others on the site? Would you feel the same way about the situation if Brian started debates but didn't insult other people or use bad language? Students may be at different ends of the HARMLESS/HARMFUL line for this situation, though they should have some sense that healthy debate is fine, but anonymity and hurtful behavior can be harmful.)

3. *Arianna visits a website that makes fun of a student at her school. She logs in under a fake name and leaves mean comments without anyone knowing who she is.*

(Guide students to consider Arianna's motivation. She leaves mean comments because she is anonymous. Arianna is clearly harming others, particularly the student victim of bullying, and promoting a climate of mean-spiritedness.)

4. *Jolie, who is 12, creates a fake social networking profile with a different name that says she's 18. She uses a photo where she's dressed up and wearing sunglasses, so it's hard to tell how old she is. She starts a relationship with an older guy she meets online. He's really fallen for her and wants to meet her in person.*

(Guide students to think about Jolie's motivation to create a fake profile and the effects of deceiving the others she meets on the Internet. Jolie may have created the profile and interacted with the older guy online just for fun, or to see what would happen. But this situation is also dangerous. Jolie is very young and communicating romantically with an older man she does not know in real life. This puts Jolie at risk, which could cause her harm.)

5. *Alejandro wants good reviews and comments on his YouTube videos, so he creates several user names. He uses them to leave good comments about his own videos.*

(Guide students to consider whether anyone is being harmed here, and how seriously. Alejandro adopting different user names seems pretty harmless, as long as he is not using them to post mean-spirited comments on other people's videos. However, he is deceiving other viewers into thinking that a lot of people love his videos.)

6. *Rob doesn't normally get good grades. But on a website for people looking for summer jobs where he has a profile, Rob says that he gets straight A's. He thinks this might help his chances of getting a job.*
(Guide students to consider the possible consequences of Rob's deception down the road. For instance, an employer might ask Rob for information about grades, want to talk to him about his classes, or expect certain skills associated with high grades. They might also talk to his teachers. Lying about grades to better his chances for a job is unethical, and can be considered harmful to Rob and to the person who might hire him.)
7. *Becky thought it was funny to join the "I hate redheads" group on her profile page. She just thought it was a silly group to join, even though she doesn't really hate people with red hair. The next day her friend Maureen (who has red hair) avoided her at school.*
(Guide students to consider how the choice Becky made in presenting herself online affected others, especially her friend Maureen. In this case, Becky didn't think twice about joining the hate group, and she did not consider how her friends might feel about the message she sent by joining the group. Spreading hate of any kind is harmful to others, and now Becky is part of it. She may also lose Maureen as a friend, so her actions have been harmful to Becky too.)
8. *In real life Phil is a quiet, shy guy. But when he's texting he feels more outgoing than in person, and sometimes he says things he normally wouldn't say. A girl who has the same math teacher as Phil texts him asking for the answers to the math quiz: "hey cutie phil ... giv me quiz answers PLZ!!" Phil likes the girl and wants to be her friend, but he would never share answers in person, and he knows he could get in trouble. He decides to text her the answers anyway.*
(Help students think about why Phil might feel compelled to share the quiz answers via text. Perhaps Phil was trying to fit in with a new group of friends and impress the girl in class. And because Phil is shy, he might feel it's easier to be outgoing through texting. Phil might be excited that this girl contacted him. However, Phil is now doing something that he is uncomfortable about and is risky and unethical.)
9. *Emma likes to play EscapeGo, a virtual game world where players use avatars to play. She pretends to be a boy and uses a male avatar because she thinks she'll be more accepted by the other players. She interacts with others in the game through her avatar, and she has made a couple of really close friends through the game.*
(Guide students to consider that in virtual game worlds it is common to interact through avatars, as the point of the game is to play a character. Emma is motivated to fit in by adopting the persona of a boy. She is deceiving the other players, but perhaps not in a way that seriously harms them. In this case, students might be split on whether it is harmless or harmful to pretend to be someone else through an avatar in an online game, particularly when it involves friendships.)
10. *Caroline likes Ethan, a guy in class. She knows where he hangs out online. She pretends to be a boy named Mike from another city who has the same interests as Ethan, so she can join his online community. She becomes his friend as "Mike" to get to know more about Ethan.*
(Guide students to consider the effects of Caroline's deception. She is motivated to get to know Ethan, but rather than doing so in an honest way she pretends to be a fake person and develop a relationship with him. This seems unethical and harmful to Ethan because, from his end, it seems like "Mike" is a real person and a real friend. Caroline's behavior also harms her ability to become real-life friends with Ethan.)

After the activity, encourage students to discuss the following questions:

- *What kinds of information helped you decide if something was harmless or harmful?* (Students might consider what the person’s motivation was for adopting a different identity, the context and situation, the site the person is using, and the people with whom the person is communicating.)
- *What did you think about before choosing where to stand on the HARMLESS/HARMFUL line?* (Students should think about all the possible ways the person’s actions could affect himself or herself, and all the ways it could affect others.)
- *How will you decide if adopting a different identity online is okay?* (Ask students to provide concrete examples of how they might think and act differently before presenting themselves in different ways online. Are there certain situations where this is okay, or not okay?)

ENCOURAGE students to think about the questions in the “Use Common Sense!” box for guidance whenever they consider adopting a different online identity.

- *Do I feel good about doing this? Or do I feel as though I’m doing something wrong?*
- *Am I harming others? Am I harming myself?*
- *Am I still true to who I am on the inside?*
- *Would I do this or say this in person, with people I know?*

Which Me Should I Be?

1. Which of the following is an example of a RISKY way to present oneself in a different way online?

- a) Raquel creates an avatar in a virtual world with pink hair, even though her hair is brown in real life
- b) Dan's profile picture is an image of his dog
- c) Nick lies to someone he meets online by saying he's in college

2. On Lucy's social networking profile, she posts that she is older than her real age and that she likes rock music, which she actually doesn't like. Which of the following might be a possible consequence of how Lucy presents herself online?

- a) Lucy might get attention from older people who think she is the age she has posted
- b) People might start talking to Lucy about rock music
- c) Both a and b

3. Evan likes Maria, but she is dating Josh. Evan pretends to be Maria online and posts angry messages on Josh's blog so that Josh thinks she is mad at him. Evan is _____ Josh by pretending to be Maria.

- a) deceiving
- b) helping
- c) motivating

Which Me Should I Be?

1. Which of the following is an example of a RISKY way to present oneself in a different way online?

- a) Raquel creates an avatar in a virtual world with pink hair, even though her hair is brown in real life
- b) Dan's profile picture is an image of his dog
- c) Nick lies to someone he meets online by saying he's in college**

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **c**. Presenting yourself differently online can be fun and freeing, but sometimes it can also get you into uncomfortable situations.

2. On Lucy's social networking profile, she posts that she is older than her real age and that she likes rock music, which she actually doesn't like. Which of the following might be a possible consequence of how Lucy presents herself online?

- a) Lucy might get attention from older people who think she is the age she has posted
- b) People might start talking to Lucy about rock music
- c) Both a and b**

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **c**. The way you present yourself online can affect the way people interact with you.

3. Evan likes Maria, but she is dating Josh. Evan pretends to be Maria online and posts angry messages on Josh's blog so that Josh thinks she is mad at him. Evan is _____ Josh by pretending to be Maria.

- a) deceiving**
- b) helping
- c) motivating

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **a**. Evan is deceiving Josh because he is pretending to be someone he is not.

Common Sense on Self-Expression and Identity

What's the Issue?

In the offline world, unless it's Halloween it's pretty clear who you are. But online, your kids can be penguins, zombies, or ninjas. Their screen names can be SexyKitten or AngryBoy. The fact is in digital life kids can be anyone they want to be. They can make up screen names, create fictitious profiles, or look any way they want by designing an avatar (a cartoon alter ego) that is only restricted by their imaginations.

Why Does It Matter?

Because so much of the way kids interact in the online world revolves around creating personal profiles and avatars, identity starts to take on a new meaning. Playing around with creative identities can be a safe and imaginative way for kids to explore who they are. And having an alter ego can be a real gift for a kid who's particularly shy or who fears rejection.

On the other hand, a digital identity can be a way for kids to dodge personal consequences. When kids are disguised as anonymous, they can push limits and act in ways they wouldn't in the real world. Some may explore antisocial or harmful identities – from being a thug to an anorexic. Others simply over-share and create reputations that might come back to haunt them. Either way, if there's a large gap between an online and offline identity, it can fragment a kid's sense of self (especially when the online identity gets a lot of feedback and the kid becomes dependent on it). Add in the potential of a huge audience, and kids' natural desire for attention and recognition can turn into something less than healthy – perhaps a quest for “15 minutes of fame.”

common sense says

Talk to your kids about anonymity. Just because your kids are disguised doesn't mean they can't be identified. They must be responsible for their actions, whether they're portrayed as a penguin or a person.

Remember that exploration is part of growing up. Ask questions about your kids' online identities. Why did they make the choices they did?

If your kids' avatars or screen names concern you, talk with them. Ask questions about their choices. And don't be too quick to worry or judge. Their identities can mean something deep, or be the result of a whim.

Identities grounded in hatred, violence, illegal activities, or risky sexual behavior should be avoided entirely. No child needs to be associated with unhealthy or unethical behavior.

Ask your kids to think about who they want to be in their online life. Is the digital identity they're creating currently how they want to be perceived? How about in 5 years? In 20 years? Remind them that they have the power to present and control their identities and reputations.