

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**

EXPLAIN to students that they will use the HARMLESS/HARMFUL line to show their group's responses to various situations in which someone presents themselves differently online.

REMINd 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.

*What **motivates** this person to present himself or herself differently online?*

Guide students to consider the motivation behind 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. Adopting different user names seems pretty harmless, as long as Alejandro 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.

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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?*