



Cracking the Gender Code

Essential Question

Are there unspoken rules about how boys and girls should act on social network sites?

Estimated time: 45 minutes

Lesson Overview

Students explore whether or not “gender codes” – expectations about boys’ and girls’ roles – shape how people act online. Students first discuss if language in texts and posts can be “masculine” or “feminine,” and why. They then fill out a mock social network profile, imagining that they are a teen of the opposite sex. The lesson concludes with a discussion about online gender codes and the extent to which students identify with them.

Standards Alignment –

Common Core: RI.6.4, RI.6.7, RI.6.8, RI.6.10, W.6.4, W.6.7, W.6.10, SL.6.1a-d, SL.6.4, SL.6.6, L.6.6; RI.7.4, RI.7.8, RI.7.10, W.7.4, W.7.7, W.7.10, SL.7.1a-d, SL.7.4, SL.7.6, L.7.6; RI.8.4, RI.8.8, RI.8.10, W.8.4, W.8.7, W.8.10, SL.8.1a-d, SL.8.4, SL.8.6, L.8.6

NETS-S: 1a-d, 2a-b, 2d, 3a-d, 4a-d, 5a-d, 6a-b, 6d

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to ...

- reflect on unspoken rules, or “codes,” that influence the way boys and girls act, both offline and online.
- analyze messages and photos on social network sites from multiple perspectives.
- consider the extent to which gender codes allow people to be true to themselves.

Key Vocabulary –

gender: social ideas about what it means to be masculine or feminine

code: a set of rules and regulations

gender code: unspoken rules and expectations about acting “masculine” or feminine”

Materials and Preparation

- Review the **Gender and Digital Life Teacher Background (Middle School)**.
- Copy the **Cracking the Code Student Handout (A)**, one for every female student in your class.
- Copy the **Cracking the Code Student Handout (B)**, one for every male student in your class.
- Review the **Cracking the Code Student Handout – Teacher Version**.

Family Resources

- Send home the **Boys, Girls, and Media Messages Family Tip Sheet (Middle & High School)**.

Note: This lesson centers on social network sites. Before this lesson begins, you may want to take an informal survey of the kind of social media that your students use. Some may be on sites like Facebook, even though they do not yet meet its age requirement. Others may meet Facebook’s age requirement but still not have an account. Regardless of students’ exposure to social network sites, your class can have meaningful conversations about how boys and girls use – or may use – social network sites.

introduction

Warm-up (5 minutes)

WRITE the following messages on the board for students to see. Have students imagine that these messages are comments that two different people posted on their friend's photo.

- 1) *OMG you look SO pretty here! Luv u!*
- 2) *Dude. Chill post.*

ASK students to guess the sex of the person who left each comment. A boy and a girl? Two girls? Two boys? (Students will likely associate the first comment with a girl, and the second with a boy.)

HAVE students explain their answers. How do they know? Are they sure? What makes them so sure?

Sample responses:

- Girls usually say “OMG” and use exclamation marks a lot.
- Girls usually compliment each other about how they look in photos.
- Boys usually keep things short, and try to seem cool or chill.
- Boys usually call each other “dude” more than girls do.

ASK:

Is it fair to assume that all girls and boys write messages like these?

Students' answers will vary. Guide them to consider that everyone is different. Just because someone is a boy or a girl doesn't mean they definitely act in certain ways.

teach 1

What Are Gender Codes? (5 minutes)

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary term **gender**. Consider explaining that gender is different from sex (being biologically male or female). Boys, for example, are not biologically hardwired to call one another “dude.” Nor are girls born thinking that they should call each other pretty. Gender is a type of learned behavior.

ASK students to define the Key Vocabulary terms **code** and **gender code** in their own words. Then provide a definition. (Students may associate terms like “Guy Code,” “Bro Code” or “Girl Code” with unspoken rules about dating and friendships. Guide students to think about gender codes in a broader sense – as expectations for differences between boys' and girls' behavior.)

TELL students that, as a class, they are going to explore teen gender codes and how they impact their everyday lives – both offline and online.

teach 2

Profile Swap (15 minutes)

DIVIDE the class into four groups: two groups of girls and two groups of boys.

DISTRIBUTE the **Cracking the Code Student Handout (A)** to each boy in your class.

DISTRIBUTE the **Cracking the Code Student Handout (B)** to each girl in your class.

TELL students that you have given them a mock social network site profile. The boys are going to fill out Ashley Johnson's profile, taking on the perspective of a girl. The girls are going to fill out Ty Ramirez's profile, taking on the perspective of a boy.

INSTRUCT students to complete the activity as directed. Allow them to work in their groups for about 10 minutes, and then have groups reassemble for a full-class discussion.

teach 3

Profile Swap – Class Discussion (15 minutes)

EXPLAIN that each group will present its profile to the rest of the class. Students should hold their comments and questions until after all the groups have presented.

INVITE the girls to present the profiles they created for Ty Ramirez.

ASK the girls the following questions:

- *How did your group decide what Ty likes, watches, and listens to? What personality did you give him, and why?*
- *What kinds of language, symbols, and/or emoticons did you use when filling out the posts for Ty and his friends? Why?*
- *Do you think that teen boys tend to act certain ways online? If so, how?*

INVITE the boys to present the profiles they created for Ashley Johnson to the rest of the class.

ASK the boys the follow-up questions listed above, substituting Ashley and teen girls.

ENCOURAGE the girls to respond to the boys' depictions of girls on social network sites. How accurate do they think they are? What aspects do they identify with? Are there things they do not identify with?

ENCOURAGE the boys to respond to the girls' depictions, asking them the same questions.

ASK:

What do you think about the photo on Ashley's profile that shows girls taking a picture of themselves? Do all girls take these kinds of photos? Do boys take these kinds of photos, too?

Students' answers will vary. They may talk about how girls take more pictures of themselves with their friends than boys do. They might also say that girls pose for photos more than boys do. Some students may argue that it's a matter of personality, rather than gender.

Do you think that boys post pictures of themselves with their friends as much as girls do? Why or why not?

Students answers will vary. Research shows that as boys enter adolescence, they are less likely to maintain close friendships the way that younger boys do. Teen boys are more likely to equate independence with being manly, cool, and/or popular. Thus, they might not take photos of friends in the same way that girls do.

POINT OUT that it seems like people post photos, comments, and information on their profiles with a certain understanding that – or even an intention for – other people to see it. Ask students what they think about this. Do we act certain ways online knowing that there's an audience?

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 are gender codes? Where do people learn them?

Gender codes are social rules that define which traits, behavior, or objects are “masculine” or “feminine.” We learn them from culture and society – from family, friends, local communities, and the media.

Do you think that boys and girls feel pressure to act certain ways because of gender codes?

Students' answers will vary. Guide students to discuss the ways gender expression can be either freeing or restrictive.

ASK the boys:

What is one thing that you wish boys generally did differently online, or with digital media? In other words, do you wish that there was a common attitude or behavior among boys that would change?

Students' answers will vary.

ASK the girls:

What is one thing that you wish girls generally did differently online, or with digital media?

Students' answers will vary.

Extension Activity

Have the girls fill out Ashley Johnson's profile, and answer the discussion questions. Have the boys do the same with Ty Ramirez's profile.

At-Home Activity

Have students explore the role that the media plays in shaping our ideas about gender codes. Encourage them to investigate forms of mass media – advertisements, songs, TV show previews, movie trailers, news articles – and identify the different messages about gender roles that they see. How are women represented and valued in the media? How about men? Encourage students to reflect on whether these messages influence what ordinary people post and share online.

Cracking the Gender Code

Directions

From a girl's perspective, how do you think boys express themselves online? How do they communicate? Fill out the profile below as if you were Ty Ramirez and his friends. Then answer the discussion questions on the following page.



Ty Ramirez

Ty likes
 Ty likes
 Ty watched
 Ty listened to



Ty Ramirez updated his status:
 July 29



Ty replied:

Ty Ramirez was tagged in 1 photo



Photos courtesy of www.thinkstock.com

Discussion Questions

1. How did your group decide what Ty likes, watched, and listens to? What personality did you give him? Why?

2. What kind of language, symbols, and/or emoticons did you use when filling out the posts and comments for Ty and his friends? Why?

3. What are some similarities and differences between the ways that boys and girls express themselves online?

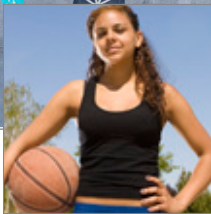
Similarities	Differences

4. Do you think that boys feel pressure to act certain ways online?

Cracking the Gender Code

Directions

From a boy's perspective, how do you think girls express themselves online? How do they communicate? Fill out the profile below as if you were Ashley Johnson and her friends. Then answer the discussion questions on the following page.



Ashley Johnson

Ashley Johnson was tagged in 1 photo



Ashley likes
Ashley likes
Ashley watched
Ashley listened to

Ashley Johnson was tagged in 1 photo



Ashley replied:



Ashley Johnson updated her status:
July 29



Photos courtesy of www.thinkstock.com

Discussion Questions

1. How did your group decide what Ashley likes, watched, and listens to? What personality did you give her? Why?

2. What kind of language, symbols, and/or emoticons did you use when filling out the posts and comments for Ashley and her friends? Why?

3. What are some similarities and differences between the ways that boys and girls express themselves online?

Similarities	Differences

4. Do you think that girls feel pressure to act certain ways online?

Distribute this handout to the girls in your class. The boxes below are meant to give you a sense of what the students should fill out and where. They do not appear on the students' handouts.

Directions

From a girl's perspective, how do you think boys express themselves online? How do they communicate? Fill out the profile below as if you were Ty Ramirez and his friends. Then answer the discussion questions on the following page.



Ty Ramirez

Students should list Ty's favorite activities, hobbies, brand names, and/or companies, etc.

Ty likes
Ty likes
Ty watched
Ty listened to

Students should list a TV show or film that Ty recently watched.

Students should list a song title and/or band that Ty likes.



Ty Ramirez updated his status:
July 29

Here, students should write a status update for Ty. Status updates are often short musings, complaints, shout-outs, announcements, opinions, or links to webpages of interest.



Students should write a message from one of Ty's guy friends. (Encourage them to give him a name.) Students may notice that he has posted twice on Ty's Timeline lately, which indicates that he might be a close friend.



Students should create the girl's post, as well as Ty's comment on her post. They should decide what the nature of their relationship is, and be able to explain how they made their decision.



Ty replied:

Ty Ramirez was tagged in 1 photo



Here, students should recognize that two of Ty's friends have commented on a photo that he was tagged in. They should decide what those comments are. They should also write Ty's public reply to his friends. There should be three comments in total.



Discussion Questions

1. How did your group decide what Ty likes, watched, and listens to? What personality did you give him? Why?

2. What kind of language, symbols, and/or emoticons did you use when filling out the posts and comments for Ty and his friends? Why?

3. What are some similarities and differences between the ways that boys and girls express themselves online?

Similarities	Differences

4. Do you think that boys feel pressure to act certain ways online?

Distribute this handout to the boys in your class. The boxes below are meant to give you a sense of what the students should fill out and where. They do not appear on the students' handouts.

Directions

From a boy's perspective, how do you think girls express themselves online? How do they communicate? Fill out the profile below as if you were Ashley Johnson and her friends. Then answer the discussion questions on the following page.



 Ashley Johnson

Students should list Ashley's favorite activities, hobbies, brand names, and/or companies, etc.

Ashley Johnson updated her profile picture



Ashley likes
Ashley likes
Ashley watched
Ashley listened to

Students should list a TV show or film that Ashley recently watched

Students should list a song title and/or band that Ashley likes.

Ashley Johnson was tagged in 1 photo



Students should recognize that two of Ashley's friends have commented on a photo that she was tagged in. They should write both comments here.

 Students should recognize that Ashley recently updated her profile picture, which appears here. Students should write a comment that Ashley's friend made on the photo. (Encourage them to give her a name.) They should also write Ashley's reply to her friend's comment.

 Ashley replied:

 Ashley Johnson updated her status:
July 29

Here, students should write a status update for Ashley. Status updates are often short musings, complaints, shout-outs, announcements, opinions, or links to webpages of interest.

Discussion Questions

1. How did your group decide what Ashley likes, watched, and listens to? What personality did you give her? Why?

2. What kind of language, symbols, and/or emoticons did you use when filling out the posts and comments for Ashley and her friends? Why?

3. What are some similarities and differences between the ways that boys and girls express themselves online?

Similarities	Differences

4. Do you think that girls feel pressure to act certain ways online?

What does gender have to do with digital citizenship and literacy?

In middle school, many young teens become keenly aware of what it means to be popular, and how others perceive them. They not only turn to mass media for hints about how teen girls and boys should look and act, but also to peers online. The problem is that the media often encourages narrow definitions of boys' and girls' roles. Kids may then perpetuate gender stereotypes when using digital media, whether creating avatars in virtual worlds, posting videos and photo albums, texting, or Instant Messaging.

In order to learn how to be responsible and respectful digital media users, young teens must also develop an awareness of the unspoken rules, assumptions, and stereotypes that can inform their behavior. Gender norms — or common social ideas about masculinity and femininity — play a critical role in framing how young teens develop identities, express themselves, and hang out. Kids who do not think critically about gender stereotypes can be misinformed about how the world perceives them and what they can grow up to be.

Why Does It Matter?

Your students are media creators, with the ability to publish content round-the-clock. This ability, combined with constant access to all kinds of media, makes it critically important to teach kids how to recognize and understand gender stereotypes. Adult mentors are well positioned to help young teens develop lifelong media literacy skills — ones that will discourage them from perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

To be upstanding, teens need to crack the gender code. Teens need to think critically about common attitudes that can fuel issues such as digital drama, cyberbullying, and sexting. Quite often, these issues are rooted in social attitudes, not the technology itself.

Not Your Specialty? Not a Problem!

There are more classroom connections than you think. Talking about gender roles can create an easy segue between the subject you regularly teach — whether history, English, or health and wellness — and a class discussion about digital citizenship. Refer to the following page of this backgrounder for tips to help you get started.

Treat students like the experts. Encourage students to feel as though they're teaching you about how they and their friends use digital media, and encourage them to dig deeper into issues by asking lots of questions. They may start the lesson with a certain set of ideas or expectations about "the way things are" online, but then may reevaluate their opinions in the end.

SOCIAL MEDIA, SOCIAL LIFE: IT'S NOT GENDER NEUTRAL

Every day, more teen girls than teen boys text. In the daily Twitter-verse, there are also more girls than boys, and when it comes to photo posting, it's especially a girl thing...but not always a good thing.



77% TEXT DAILY
33% EVER TWEETED
75% LOVE POSTING PHOTOS



60% TEXT DAILY
22% EVER TWEETED
42% LOVE POSTING PHOTOS

For girls, especially, putting their pictures online can be stressful:



57% girls vs. 28% boys sometimes feel left out after seeing photos of others together online

45% girls vs. 24% boys worry about other people posting ugly photos of them online

28% girls vs. 9% boys have edited photos of themselves before posting

Source: *Social Media, Social Life: How Teens View Their Digital Lives* (June 26, 2012). A Common Sense Media Research Study. <http://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/social-media-social-life>

ALL TEACHERS

Know the difference between *gender* and *sex*. Gender has to do with social identities and roles. Gender is about how a culture defines terms like “masculine,” “feminine,” and everything in between. One’s sex, on the other hand, is a matter of anatomy and biology. For example, when you separate a class into groups of boys and girls, you are separating them by sex, not by gender.

ENGLISH TEACHERS

Imagine characters in books using 21st-century technology. What would Holden Caulfield think of texting? How would digital drama play out between the Montagues and the Capulets? Have students explore how male and female characters’ lives would change if they had access to social networks, cell phones, and other forms of digital communication.

HISTORY TEACHERS

Think about gender roles across history and across cultures. Depending on when and where people grow up, expectations about men and women’s roles may differ. For example, in the early 20th century, Americans associated the color pink with strength and masculinity, rather than femininity. Have students interview older relatives about how gender roles have changed in the past century, as well as the types of media and technology that they grew up with.

TECHNOLOGY TEACHERS

Explore gender gaps in the fields of science, technology, and math. Fifty-seven percent of girls say that if they went into a STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) career, they’d have to work harder than a man just to be taken seriously.¹ Discuss with students where these attitudes come from, and find examples of role models who have challenged the status quo, such as the late Sally Ride.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS TEACHERS

Dive deeper into media messages. The Internet allows us to access media anytime, anywhere. Explore messages about boys and girls in your students’ favorite magazines, songs, movies, and TV shows. For example, you can use documentary films such as *MissRepresentation*, as well as those offered by the Media Education Foundation, to spark class discussion about gender representations in the media.

¹ “Generation STEM: What Girls Say about Science, Technology, and Math.” Girl Scouts of the USA (2012).

Cracking the Gender Code

1. The term “gender code” often describes _____

- a) the option you have on a social network site to list whether you’re male or female.
- b) unspoken “rules” or expectations about how boys and girls should look and act.
- c) an image that will take you to a website if you scan it with a smartphone.

2. Joseph takes a selfie (a picture that he took of himself) and posts it online. His friend David leaves a comment that says:



David S whaaaat. ur such a girl. should i call you josephina now?
December 3 at 8:15 pm

True or false: David’s comment is an example of a *gender code*.

- a) True
- b) False

3. Where do ideas about differences between girls and boys come from?

- a) From the communities we live in
- b) From our family members
- c) From our friends
- d) From the media
- e) All the above

Cracking the Gender Code

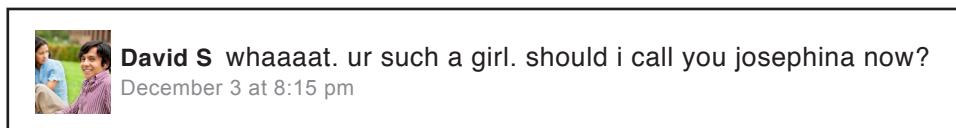
1. The term “gender code” often describes _____

- a) the option you have on a social network site to list whether you’re male or female.
- b) unspoken “rules” or expectations about how boys and girls should look and act.**
- c) an image that will take you to a website if you scan it with a smartphone.

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **b**. Gender codes are social rules that define which traits, behavior, or objects are “masculine” or “feminine.” People sometimes act certain ways so as not to violate gender codes.

2. Joseph takes a selfie (a picture that he took of himself) and posts it online. His friend David leaves a comment that says:



True or false: David’s comment is an example of a *gender code*.

- a) True**
- b) False

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **a**, True. David’s comment implies that Joseph is acting girly online by posting a selfie, and that he should act more like a boy.

3. Where do ideas about differences between girls and boys come from?

- a) From the communities we live in
- b) From our family members
- c) From our friends
- d) From the media
- e) All the above**

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **e**. We learn about differences between boys and girls from the world around us: the people we know, the messages and images we see, the stories we hear. Many of these differences are ideas and opinions, not actual rules.