

Feeling on Display

Essential Question

Are girls and boys judged differently when they post photos online?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to ...


- identify examples of teens evaluating one another's photos online.
- compare and contrast attitudes toward boys and girls regarding editing, posting, and commenting on personal photos that are posted on social network sites.
- analyze broader gender norms and media messages that may frame the way people use and interpret photos on social network sites.

Key Vocabulary –

image: a representation of someone or something, such as a photograph or drawing; the way someone or something is perceived by others

double standard: a rule that is unfairly applied to different people or groups of people

Materials and Preparation

- Review the **Gender and Digital Life Teacher Backgrounder**
-  **Preview the video, “Feeling on Display,” and prepare to show it to students.**
- **Video Discussion Guide** for teacher.

Note: This lesson centers on photos on social network sites, specifically sites that allow users to choose profile pictures and upload personal images. Before starting this lesson, you may want to take an informal survey of the kind of social media that your students use. For students who do not have social network profiles, you can ask similar questions about students' headshots or “senior pages” in the school yearbook. Or, alternatively, have them imagine what it would be like to upload personal photos to an online profile.

introduction

Warm-up (10 minutes)

ASK:

On social network sites, how do you decide which picture should be your profile picture? What do you think makes a “perfect” profile picture?

If time allows, consider directing this question to female students first, then to male students. Encourage all students to describe and debate the criteria that they use to decide whether a photo is “worthy” of being a profile picture.

Who sets the standards for what is considered a “good” profile picture? Where do these standards, or ideas, come from?

Students’ answers will vary. They may have a difficult time articulating where these standards come from. Some may argue that it’s entirely a matter of personal self-expression. Some may argue that the more feedback you receive on your profile picture, the more “successful” it is.

What would happen if you posted a profile picture and you didn’t receive any “Likes” or comments on it? What would be going through your mind? What would you do?

Students may acknowledge that it feels good to receive attention from friends online. People may feel validated, flattered, and supported when they receive feedback on photos, status updates, etc., or feel neglected when they don’t.

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary term **image**.

DISCUSS how the two meanings of the term relate to one another. Guide students to understand that they may choose images of themselves, such as photographs on social network sites, based on the kind of image they want to present to the world.

TELL students that they are going to watch and discuss a video of teens their age having a real, open discussion about the way they and their friends manage their online images, especially with photos.

teach 1

Video Viewing and Discussion

 **SHOW** students “Feeling on Display” video.

INSTRUCT students using the discussion sheet on a class discussion about the video.

ASK:

Do people create online images of themselves? Do they try to look, act, or be viewed in certain ways? Why or why not?

Students’ answers will vary. Encourage students to discuss people’s intentions when they post a photo. Do they expect people to see and comment on it? Do they have certain people in mind that they are trying to impress when they post the photo? Why or why not?

teach 2

Decoding the Double Standard

DISCUSS the following questions as a class:

ASK:

Are girls known for posting certain kinds of photos or albums? If so, what kinds? Why do you think that is?

Answers will vary. One common belief about girls is that they are more popular when they look pretty, cute, or “hot.” Students may describe how some girls strike poses for the camera. They may also talk about “selfies,” shots that people take of themselves. Encourage students to recognize that girls often learn at an early age that their appearance is important, and that it will be scrutinized by other people.

Are there certain ideas, or social messages, that influence the kinds of photos that girls typically post? How might these attitudes affect the kinds of photo comments girls post amongst themselves?

Help students recognize that the messages we receive about how women are supposed to look and act can influence how girls treat online photos, and how they judge the online photos of others. For example, girls tend to show affection to their female friends on social network sites by complimenting the way they look in their photos (“You look adorable!” or “SO pretty!”) This doesn’t happen as much with guys.

Are boys known for posting certain kinds of photos or albums? If so, what kinds? Why do you think that is?

Students will likely say that boys are expected to appear tough, stoic, and/or popular with both girls and other guys. They may also note that boys may feel that it’s legitimate for them to be critical of girls’ appearance. Students should recognize that these messages come from the people they know, from the media, and from their online experiences.

Are there certain ideas, or social messages, that influence the kinds of photos that boys typically post? How might these attitudes affect the kinds of photo comments boys post amongst themselves?

Boys may be less expressive when commenting on one another’s photos, because boys are often taught that they shouldn’t show emotion and should be independent. Consider discussing where these kinds of expectations come from, and whether they could be restrictive for boys.

closing

Wrap-up (5 minutes)

You can use these questions to assess your students' understanding of the lesson objectives.

ASK:

Are people aware of their online images? Do they try to make themselves look certain ways? Why or why not?

Students should acknowledge that many people are indeed aware of how they look online, and how they might be perceived by others. But the time and energy people spend on shaping their online image varies.

Do we have different expectations for how girls and guys should look or act online? If so, where do we learn these attitudes? If not, why not?

Perhaps girls and guys share a similar consciousness about their online appearance. Guys, however, arguably face less outward pressure regarding feedback on how they look in photos. Students may argue that girls are judged more harshly than boys for their appearance. These ideas and attitudes stem from many sources: family, friends, the media, culture, etc.

How aware are you of how you comment on other people's photos? Do you think this differs for guys and girls?

Answers will vary.

Feeling on Display

Directions

Watch the video “**Feeling on Display.**” Then answer the following questions as a group. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.

Part I: Pressure

- Marco says that people try to “prove something” with the photos they post online. What do you think he means by this? Do you agree?
- Zara says that girls worry about their image all the time – whether online or offline – and that they face more pressure than guys. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Part II: Judgment

- Carla says that regardless of gender, all teens judge one another. Do people judge how others look and act online? Does it differ for boys and girls? If so, how does it differ?
- What do you think of Claudia’s statement that it’s easy to judge other people online because “You have the safety net of being in front of a screen – you’re not face to face”?

Part III: Comments

- Both Linh and Leah talked about receiving compliments online. What do you think of what they said? Do people fish for compliments online? How might photos and photo comments boost people’s self-esteem?
- Do you think that people react differently to a “selfie” taken by a girl versus a “selfie” taken by a boy? Why or why not? (*Note: The term “selfie” is used to describe when someone takes a picture of themselves, either by holding a camera towards them or by using a mirror.*)

Part IV: Double Standards

- Do you think that a double standard exists between boys and girls when it comes to online appearance? If so, what?
- Randy says, “Some guys try to play the macho role without necessarily posting pictures of themselves flexing. ... It’s much more subtle but it’s still there.” What do you think he means by this? Do you agree?

Feeling on Display

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

Imagine a teen girl clicking through her friend's profile pictures, wishing she could look just as slender. Or imagine a teen boy purposefully waiting an hour before texting a girl back, just to make himself appear more independent and detached. Teens are 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 boys and girls should look and act, but also to their peers online. The problem is that the media often encourages narrow definitions of boys' and girls' roles. And these narrow definitions can then make their way into peer-to-peer interactions online, making it that much harder for a teen to keep perspective on media messages.

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 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>

tips for ...

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 research how attitudes about boys and girls have changed over time, and the extent to which these differences relate to race, class, and community culture. Consider connecting virtually with a school or class in another country, and have students explore what it’s like to be a teen boy or girl in another part of the world.

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).