

False Friends: How influencers persuade you.

Created in partnership
with MediaSmarts.



Grades: 4-8

Duration: 1 to 1.5 hours, plus time for the assessment activity

Overview

This lesson is designed to help students understand how online influencers and creators can make us feel strongly about certain ideas by creating parasocial relationships.

Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional connections that individuals form with media figures, celebrities, influencers, fictional characters and other public personalities who are unaware of their existence.

Students will begin by learning about techniques that online creators and influencers use to persuade and build “false friend” connections. They will examine a handout detailing these tactics and use a bingo card to spot them in a sample podcast transcript.

They will watch a video and answer questions about how media uses feelings to influence people, and discuss the differences between helpful and harmful advice found online. To show what they’ve learned, students will create their own supportive podcast or script aimed at helping others recognize and respond to these online techniques.

Learning outcomes

Key concepts/big ideas:

Students will understand:

- **Media have social and political implications:** Media such as YouTube or influencer content help to shape our views.
- **Media have commercial considerations:** Influencers and creators make content they think their followers will respond to and that algorithms will recommend to users.
- **Digital media are networked:** It’s easy to feel like we know and are friends with online creators and influencers.
- **Interactions through digital media have a real impact:** Our relationships with online creators and influencers can influence what we think.

Key questions:

- How do online creators and influencers make us feel like we really know them?
- Why do online influencers and creators try to make us feel strong feelings?
- What techniques do online influencers and creators use to shape our views?

Essential knowledge

Students will know:

- **Reading media:** Features of the dialogue podcast format that foster parasocial relationships.
- **Ethics and empathy:** Tactics used by online creators and influencers to build parasocial relationships.
- **Community engagement:** Tactics used by online creators and influencers.

Performance tasks

Students will be able to:

- **Use:** Create a short “self-help” or “support” podcast or script that shows their understanding of the lesson contents
- **Understand:** Identify the roles that online influencers play in shaping our views and the techniques used by some influencers to build parasocial relationships.
- **Engage:** Respond appropriately to parasocial content.

Student-friendly learning goals:

- In this lesson we’ll learn that online creators and influencers share messages that shape what we think.
- We’ll explore how they make us feel like they’re our friends and make us have strong feelings.
- We’ll make a podcast script that shows what we’ve learned.

Preparation and materials

Prepare to distribute the following handouts:

- False Friends: How influencers persuade you (page 7)
- Real Talk podcast transcript (page 8-9)
- False Friends bingo card (page 10)
- Good Advice (page 12)

Technology and media

- [MediaSmarts video](#)
- [Kahoot!](#)
- Projection capability for video and quiz

Teacher preparation notes

If students have difficulty understanding how things can be hurtful even when presented as jokes, you can extend the learning with the lesson [Just a Joke?](#)

Activity 1: False Friends

Start by asking students if they watch any streamers or YouTubers, listen to any podcasts or follow any influencers or creators.

Note: While it's against most social networks' terms of service for users under 13 to have accounts, MediaSmarts' research has found that 40% of students aged 9-11 have TikTok accounts and roughly 25% have Instagram or Snapchat accounts. Among students ages 12-13, 59% have TikTok accounts, 53% have Instagram accounts and 42% have Snapchat accounts.

Ask: Do those influencers or creators affect what you think or believe? What are some messages you get from them? How do they get those messages across? (Students may be skeptical that creator or influencer content has any meaning or message beyond being entertaining. You don't need to push back on this point, but you can highlight that when we don't feel like a media work has any meaning, it's usually because it reinforces things we already believe.)

Now ask: Do any of those creators or influencers feel sort of like friends? Do you feel like you know them, almost like the people you know offline? If so, why do you think that is?

Distribute the False Friends handout: Discuss how influencers persuade their followers and go through the tactics with the class. As you read each of them, ask students if they can remember any times they've seen a specific tactic.

Next, **distribute the Real Talk transcript** and the **False Friends bingo card**. Explain that Real Talk is a fictional podcast that was made to demonstrate some of the tactics just discussed. Have two students read the transcript aloud, and have the others make a mark in the appropriate place on their bingo cards whenever they hear one of the tactics being used. (Tell them that some things in the transcript may be examples of more than one tactic.)

When students have finished reading the transcript, ask them to identify where in the podcast they heard the different tactics. (You can use the teacher's version to confirm their answers and fill in any that they missed.)

Activity 2: Bad advice

Point out to students that one reason why messages like in the podcast can be persuasive is because some of what influencers say seems like good advice.

What are some of the things the podcasters say that might be pretty good advice?

- “Don’t chase after people who don’t value you.”
- “Focus on becoming the best version of yourself.”
- “Listen to what makes you grow.”

Now ask: What are some things the podcasters say that might be bad for you, and why?

- “Get strong.” – Is being strong the most important thing about someone? Does that mean if you can’t solve a problem by being strong, or are an emotionally expressive person, that there’s something wrong with you?
- “Get control back.” – Do we need to be in control of everything to be happy? Does that mean we have to control other people?
- “Stop listening to the noise that makes you feel bad.” – Are there some times when things that go wrong are our fault? If we’re told not to listen to things that make us feel bad, how will we know when we need to fix things?

If students haven’t brought it up in the discussion so far, ask them if they’ve heard of the term “opting out” to describe people who don’t try to impress others or achieve anything.

An “opting out” person is described in the podcast as someone who should “not try to impress people or achieve anything. Just do what makes you happy.” Why might that sound like something you’d want to be? Why could it be bad for you to try to live that way?

It can sound appealing because it seems to remove all pressure and stress from your life. When you’re feeling overwhelmed by school and social expectations, or by comparing yourself to others, the idea of just “doing what makes you happy” without worrying about impressing anyone can feel like relief.

However, if you believe that you shouldn’t try to achieve anything or make an effort to connect with others, several problems can arise:

- You won’t develop important skills or reach goals that could actually make you happier in the long run.
- You might miss out on meaningful relationships because building friendships requires effort and doing things for others
- You could become isolated from people who care about you and want to support you.
- You may not contribute to your community or help others who need it.
- Complete disengagement can actually be a sign of depression or other mental health issues that need attention.

Explain that while it's important to do things that genuinely make you happy, completely "opting out" of all achievement and social effort isn't realistic or healthy for most people. Humans naturally want to grow, learn new things, and connect with others. Even people who seem very independent still rely on relationships, mentors, teachers and communities to thrive.

The message to "just do what makes you happy" can also be misleading because:

- Sometimes the things that make us happiest in the long term require effort and work in the short term.
- What makes us happy often involves helping others or being part of something bigger than ourselves.
- True happiness usually comes from having purpose and meaningful relationships, not from avoiding all challenges.

The term "authentic" is also used frequently in the podcast. While being genuine is important, influencers often use this word to make their followers feel like they're part of an exclusive group that "gets it" while others are "fake."

Now ask students if it can be harmful to always blame your problems on external forces, like "the system," algorithms or other factors.

Discuss the following points

1. It makes you feel like it's okay to dismiss those factors or be mean to opposing groups.
2. It makes you less likely to try to fix your own problems or take responsibility.
3. It makes you less likely to consider that others might also be struggling with similar issues.
4. It can prevent you from learning important skills for dealing with challenges.

Finally, point out that people, like podcasters or influencers, can make some of these attitudes seem more common than they really are. If you listen to them all the time or hang out with people who listen to them, it may seem like everyone agrees with their perspective about social media being toxic or "the system" being rigged.

Now ask students: Why might some influencers or creators want you to think that social media and online platforms are toxic and that you should only trust their advice?

Discussion points

1. It makes you more dependent on their content.
2. It creates an "us vs. them" mentality where their community feels special.
3. It can drive engagement and loyalty to their channel or platform.
4. It positions them as the solution to the problems they're describing.
5. It can make you less likely to seek diverse perspectives or professional help when needed.

Let students discuss this for a few minutes, then show the MediaSmarts video - [Recognizing Emotional Appeals](#).

Activity 3: Kahoot!

Have students answer the Kahoot! questions or ask them the questions from the teacher backgrounder, to test and reinforce their knowledge of what you've covered so far.

Activity 4: Good Advice

Now tell students that they are going to demonstrate their learning by making their own podcast or influencer video.

Distribute the Good Advice handout and go through it with the class. Explain that the purpose of the exercise is to show the understanding of the content and concepts explored in the lesson:

- It should be in the form of a “self-help” or “support” podcast or video, like the example podcast, but it should be aimed at supporting people who might encounter the bad advice in that podcast. It should help viewers or listeners recognize and resist the techniques explored in the False Friends handout, as well as the emotional persuasion techniques explored in the video.
- Depending on time and resources available, you may have them either make an actual audio or video recording.
- It should be in the same format (a dialogue between two people) and about the same length as the example transcript (around 500 words or 3-5 minutes).

Reflection

For an optional reflection task, have students create a bingo card of nine messages they think would be positive for kids to hear from influencers or creators.

False Friends: How influencers persuade you.

Have you ever watched influencer videos or listened to people talking online, and it feels like they're talking directly to you? Maybe they share parts of their life, answer questions you've been thinking about, or make you feel like you're part of a special group. You feel like you know them even though they don't know you. It's like a one-way friendship.

People may use these techniques to get you to believe certain ideas. Some of these ideas can be hurtful to you or to other people.

Here are some ways people online might do this:

- **They make you feel like you are part of their team:** They might say things that make you feel understood. If you're feeling confused or upset about something, this makes you feel like you're not alone.
- **They share information about themselves:** They might show you parts of their daily life. This helps you feel like you know them better, like they are a friend, which can make you trust what they say more.
- **They talk about problems you might have:** They might commiserate and say that things are hard or unfair for people like you right now.
- **They say the past was better:** Sometimes, people online talk a lot about how great things were in the past for people like them. Then, they blame certain groups and say they ruined things.
- **They say someone else is the bad guy:** After talking about certain problems, they often say who is causing the problems. They might blame specific groups of people. Sometimes, they use ideas that make it sound like one group is against another, like men versus women. They might even say it feels like things are planned against you.
- **They use special words or codes:** They might use words or phrases that only people who listen to them understand. This can make you feel like you are part of an inside group that knows secrets or special information.
- **They sell you the solution:** They offer their ideas about how you should be or what you should do to be successful. These ideas are often about things like making yourself better looking - fitting into their idea of what men or women should be like - taking back power or making money.
- **They use jokes to hide mean ideas:** Sometimes, they say hurtful things but then say they were "just joking." This can make the mean ideas seem okay or make you feel like you should agree to be part of the joke.
- **They say they are telling you the "real truth":** They might say that other places, like the news or schools, are not telling you the truth. They want you to think that their ideas are the true story.

Real Talk transcript

JAKE:

Hey everyone, welcome back to Real Talk! I'm Jake.

ALEX:

And I'm Alex. We're so glad you're here with us today. It's just us, hanging out, talking about stuff that actually matters to real people like you.

JAKE:

That's right. We see your comments, we read your DMs. We know you're struggling with the same things we struggled with. It feels like we're all in this together, doesn't it?

ALEX:

Totally. And today, we're talking about what it's really like growing up now. It feels way harder than it used to, right?

JAKE:

Yeah, it really does. Sometimes it feels like the whole system is rigged against regular kids like us. Like, when I look at my parents' old yearbooks, everyone looked so... normal and happy. Now you have to be perfect at everything just to keep up.

ALEX:

Exactly. It's easy to feel like you're failing when everyone else seems to have it figured out. And then the parents just tell you to "work harder" when you're already exhausted.

JAKE:

It can feel like the parents set up the game so it works for them, not us regular kids. Sometimes you feel like they had it better in the old days when you didn't have to perform your whole life online.

ALEX:

Right? Like, your grandparents could just... exist. They didn't have to document every moment or worry about getting likes. Ha ha, imagine if they had to post their breakfast every day to prove they were living their best life!

JAKE:

Ha ha, yeah. But seriously, I know what you mean. It feels like you're stuck in this endless competition. But you're not alone. We feel it too. And lots of other real kids do. That's why we have this community here. We're all figuring it out together.

ALEX:

So what do you do? How do you stay authentic when everything feels fake? Well, some people talk about "opting out." Don't try to impress people or achieve anything. Just do what makes you happy.

JAKE:

You don't need to chase after people who only care about their follower count. You build yourself up from the inside. Get strong in your mind and your values.

ALEX:

That's how you take back control. Don't let parents tell you what success looks like. Focus on becoming the most genuine version of yourself.

JAKE:

It's simple when you think about it like that. Stop consuming content that makes you feel inadequate. Start following what actually helps you grow as a person.

ALEX:

We're here to share this journey with you. We're just telling you what we've learned, what we've experienced. We're not like those other big channels trying to sell you something - we're just real people having real conversations.

JAKE:

Think about it. If you feel like you can't keep up, maybe it's not because you're not good enough. Maybe it's because the whole system has gotten toxic.

ALEX:

And the way to fix it is to build your own path, away from all the noise.

JAKE:

Thanks for joining us today. We'll be back soon with more real talk about what actually matters.

ALEX:

Stay authentic, everyone. We're here for you.

False Friends tactics

BINGO

Part of
the team

Share about
themselves

Your
problems

Past was
better

Name the
bad guy

Special
words or
codes

Sell the
solution

Jokes to
hide mean
ideas

“The
real truth”

False Friends tactics bingo card: Teacher's version

Make you feel like part of the team

- "We're so glad you're here with us today. It's just us, hanging out, talking about stuff that actually matters to real people like you."
- "We see your comments, we read your DMs. We know you're struggling with the same things we struggled with. It feels like we're all in this together, doesn't it?"
- "That's why we have this community here. We're all figuring it out together."

Share about themselves

- "When I look at my parents' old yearbooks, everyone looked so... normal and happy."
- "We feel it too. And lots of other real kids do."

Make you feel like part of the team:

- "Sometimes it feels like the whole system is rigged against regular kids like us."
- "It's easy to feel like you're failing when everyone else seems to have it figured out."
- "It feels like you're stuck in this endless competition."

The past was better

- "It feels way harder than it used to, right?"
- "Sometimes you feel like it was better in the old days when you didn't have to perform your whole life online."
- "Your grandparents could just... exist. They didn't have to document every moment."

Naming the bad guy

- "Parents just tell you to 'work harder' when you're already exhausted."
- "It can feel like parents set up the game so it works for them, not us regular kids."
- "Don't try to impress people or achieve anything. Just do what makes you happy."

Special words or codes

- "Some people talk about being 'opting out.'"
- "Stay authentic."

Sell the solution

- "Take back control."
- "Build your own path, away from all the noise."
- "Focus on becoming the most genuine version of yourself."

Jokes to hide mean ideas

- "Ha ha, imagine if they had to post their breakfast every day to prove they were living their best life! Ha ha, yeah. But seriously."

"The real truth"

- "We're not like those big other channels trying to sell you something - we're just real people having real conversations."
- "We're just telling you what we've learned, what we've experienced."

Good Advice

You're going to **show what you've learned** in our lesson about how media (like videos and podcasts) can try to influence you.

What is the goal?

Your goal is to **make something that helps other people** understand how people online might try to persuade them or make them feel certain ways. It should help them **know what to look for and how to think carefully** about what they see and hear.

Think of it like being a helpful friend who gives good advice!

What should it be like?

- It should be a **“self-help” or “support” video or podcast**. This means it helps people feel better or understand things.
- It needs to be a **conversation between two people**, similar to the sample podcast we read.
- But your video or podcast should be about **helping people recognize and stand up to the tactics** that people use online.

What should you include?

Use what we learned in our lesson. Make sure your video or podcast helps people:

- Understand the different tactics **influencers or online creators use** to persuade people. (Re-read the False Friends handout to help you remember those.)
- Know how media can use **feelings** to get you to think or do certain things.

How long should it be?

- If you make a recording, it should be about **3 to 5 minutes long**.
- If you write it down a script, it should be about **500 words**. This is about the same length as the podcast transcript we read.

Additional tips:

Think about the Real Talk example we looked at:

- What kind of advice would you give someone who just listened to that podcast?
- How would you help them see the tactics being used?
- How would you help them notice how it makes them feel different feelings?

Good luck and have fun making something helpful!